

Interzone

NEW STORIES BY

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Interzone

EDITORIAL

Lighted bars, as in other languages, a good focus on collective part take all physical has a strong effect upon the living and mental health of man. In contrast to St. Louis.

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It is an ancient tradition that the oldest mace—valued at \$1, the personal property of the right to wear it—was owned by the first New York City mayor, Giovanni Maria, and that it was used by him at the opening of the first City Hall in 1625. The mace is now in the possession of the City of New York, and is used by the Mayor at the opening of the City Hall each year. The mace is also used by the Mayor at the opening of the City Hall each year. The mace is also used by the Mayor at the opening of the City Hall each year.

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3.5 In Review

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THE DESSERTERS

GARRY KILWORTH

"You, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death

Christian teachings still run thickly in my blood. My new religion, a mere two years old to me, is like an adopted child: dear because it means by choice, not accident. But, yet, like an adopted child it can never be truly part of me. It is a grafted branch, well taken and—indeed, an extension of me—but not inherent. Thus those phrases from my childhood learnings spring to mind more readily in crises, than do the new words, though I love the latter more. Those others were with me from birth—and now I am nearer to death than the beginnings of my life. I sometimes panic. Will I be ready? Will I be ready? Or will they scream? "Dumb as a block!" in my wake as I try to gain entrance into a world I barely believe in?

"You must be Orget. I'm Jens Reece." I looked up from my newspaper to observe a tall, elegant blonde woman in a velvet outfit. The clothes were obviously Zandla Rhodes. The woman inside them finished by a Swiss school.

"It is a rude to stare, Mr Orget."

"I'm sorry. Please sit down." I placed the four-day old paper on the table before me and nodded to her companion, a thickest man with square, tan features. He was about two-thirds her height.

"You too, sir, whatever your name is."

"His name is Chota. He's a devil maker," she replied for me, taking one of the cotton chairs. Chota followed her example. Around us coffee was being served in glasses the size of egg-yolks. I signalled the Arab waiter. He saw my three fingers and gave the slightest of nods, not even turning his head. Through the glassless window behind my guests I could see the murmurings of the Hadhranmat rattling in the heat waves. Before them, the dust-rock desert furrowed unevenly by deep wadis. Brown kite hawks created visible whirlpools in the air above. I turned my attention back to my visitors.

"I expected you yesterday," I said, "and him not at all."

She stiffened, two red spots appearing on her high cheekbones. "Chota is here for a reason. It's nothing to do with protecting me, Mr Orget."

"Ray," though he's quite capable of doing so. He's from Papua. A forest fisher."

"Well, you look as though you usually know what you're doing. Did you fly up from Aden?" to the DGCS?"

She nodded. "The new wallpaper inside with a rosepotter design." It was a serious remark.

"There is only one bit of a hairy ride, isn't it? I suspect the wallpaper is to hide the cracks in the fuselage—it gets a bit bumpy over the Radfan hills, the thermals. Tend to shake up the superstructure." "I could see my frivolity was having very little effect and immediately abandoned it." Let's talk about why you're here, I said.

The coffee had arrived accompanied by three glasses of water. The waiter placed them on the table. I paid him immediately, the coins clattering on the small-brass tray. Jens Reece was staring at the thick, black sludge in her coffee glass.

"I don't mind this."

"Then don't drink it, but we're in a coffee shop. It's paid for. Now, I understand you want me to find your husband for you. That's what the letter said."

Her blue eyes observed me coolly. I could see a strength in her face I was not used to in one of her class. Then, mentally, I reproached myself for my prejudice.

"I haven't heard of anyone called Reece in the Hadhranmat," I continued. "And I would have done so, if he were here. There's not that many minutes in the area."

"His name is John Freeman. I didn't take his name when we married and he didn't ask me to."

I held up my hand as her mouth began tightening.

"Please. You needn't go into details. John Freeman I have heard of. He was at the Consulate in Santa's

wasn't he? Then he came down to the Hadhramut last cool season. I understood he discharged himself from the diplomatic service. . . . The Papuan Indian momentarily distracted me by dipping his finger into his coffee. After licking it gingerly, he took another dip and grinned at me with small blunt teeth. I smiled back.

"Friendly guy. Is he a tracker? You'd have been better with a Yemeni or an Adeni. There aren't many jungles in South Arabia."

"I don't need your caravans, Orget, just your knowledge of the local geography. Chota has a special job to do and what it is, is my business, not yours. You won't track me into revealing what he's here for. You'll know, when I'm ready to tell you."

A hot breeze came in through the window and lifted a few wispy strands of her hair. She was wearing a tied up with a yellow headscarf and I was about to say something banal like, "You look beautiful when you're calm," and then remembered in time that macho males had been out of fashion since Henry-way's thorned fell from grace, and in any case, I was too old and tired. Well, perhaps not too tired but it was a good excuse for not attempting something at which I was bound to fail.

"Fair enough Jane . . . Reese," I added. "We'll try and find you're husband for you. In my engineering days I drilled half the local desert looking for oil I never found. A man should be easy. At least he won't be hiding underneath the sand. Do you prefer horses or camels?"

"Horses."

"And a thousand wasn't it? By the way, that is."

"It was given hundred to look and three when we find him."

"If we find him."

"I didn't come all this way just to go home with my tail between my legs. We'll find him, one way or another."

"And when you do? What then?"

"That's where Chota comes in." And for the first time she smiled.

We met the next day and arranged enough provisions at the village to last us several weeks.

I explained to Jane Reese that I knew the general whereabouts of her husband and that his location would at least be confined to one of fifty places. "He's got to live near a well," I said.

"What about food?" she asked.

"If he's got money, that'll be no problem. Other well-users will sell him food as they pass through. And anyway, there's gazelle and small game." I began to check our own provisions. Sugar, tea, raisins, flour. . . . We were going into the empty quarter from Shurah, where I would have to rely on reports from strangers. Hopefully Freeman would not take too long to track down. Then I could get back to my wife in Shurah. I had not told Jane Reese about my wife because, to use Jane Reese's own words, it was none of her damn business. We were ready to set off just before noon. The horses stood waiting nearby. I untied my coat, took out my beads and knelt in the direction of Mecca.

"What are you doing?" asked Jane Reese, in a voice that suggested I was about to take part in some revolting perversion.

"I'm about to say my prayers. I'm a Muslim."

"Oh."

"You don't have any objections to Islam, do you?"

"Plenty," she replied, "but I won't let them interfere with the expedition."

"The women?" I said.

"The women," she confirmed, "and the disgusting barbaric practice of circumcising on small girls."

"Islam is beautiful," I said, "it is people that are ugly." Then I ignored her and all about me to contemplate Allah, the One God, and the Prophet, peace be upon him. The strange thing was, as a young man I had never been particularly religious. It was a woman who had been responsible for my conversion. They would never have allowed me to marry her unless I was a Muslim. Once the rituals obtained a hold on one's soul however, they were difficult to shed. They were as addictive a drug as opium, which I had also taken to, since settling in the Hadhramut. I knew that Jane Reese considered me one of those peculiar whites who have 'gone native' but I was not going to explain my complicated reasons to her. What her Papuan shadow thought, I had no idea. The whole when some must have been totally bizarre to him, yet his impact gave face registered nothing. He was probably storing all these wonders of humankind to muse before a camp fire in his native forests. . . . And then the old whitley goes down on his knees and starts waving his arms at the sun, while the women walk around him slapping the side of her back with a short whip. . . .

The wind-blown dust and grit hit into our shirt as we made our way among the foothills. Durnal temperatures at sea level were around 120 Fahrenheit, nocturnal they were still over a hundred, yet when we went up into the mountains the waterfalls from solid Jane Reese had made no murmur of complaint since we had started out three days before. She had seen black scorpions, sand-crabs and camel spiders as big as scrap plates, but she just clanked her teeth and sweated at them with her crop. The privation in the empty quarter is not a pleasant experience and though she protested as much of her skin as she could, her milky complexion suffered under the harsh sun. I felt sorry for her but she would have hated me for it, so I kept my pity to myself.

On the fourth night out at the well of Jebel Rakmel, we made a fire and cooked a lizard I had caught. She chose it as the moment to begin telling me about her husband and why she was searching for him. The story made me sick with apprehension.

"My father has been in the diplomatic service since he left university in 1922 and there was no reason why John should not take advantage of that. I persuaded him to take a post that daddy found for him in Paris. John worked there quite happily, until he was sent to Singapore to negotiate on behalf of a British throne who had been convicted of smuggling narcotics. They still hang people for drug dealing in Singapore. John failed to obtain clemency and had to witness the execution."

"When he arrived back in England he was very shaken. Shaken, I suppose, is an understatement. He was deeply disturbed and began to develop an obsession with death - especially with death by hanging. Books on capital punishment began to arrive

by post as beiches. John would take these packages to his room and lock the door, spending hours at a time, presumably studying them. Of course I was aware from unhealthily it was and contacted the family doctor but each time he called, John would either laugh it off or treat him brusquely. John's whole demeanour exuded. From a fairly passive but optimistic personality he deteriorated into an intense, pessimistic individual. He became hollow-eyed and pale, and rejected any sort of approach by me which might interfere with his new 'interest'. Finally I broached him on his reasons for his passion with death. I told him I was jealous of anything that took up so much of his time and he agreed to talk about it.

'I want to look over the edge,' he stated, emphatically.

'Over the edge of what?'

'Death. I must see what's on the other side.' There was little excitement in his tone but there was an earnestness I had not witnessed in him before. We were in our bedroom at the time - I was preparing for bed and feigning interest in my appearance because I hoped it would encourage him to disclose more of I did not appear to be concentrating on him completely - and he peered up and down behind me as I sat at the mirror.

'I believe,' he said, 'that if a man could take himself to the edge of death - yet still remain on this side then he could observe the naked soul - surprising, it exists.'

'To my credit, I did not call the doctor immediately. I allowed him to finish his explanation.'

'I've been reading about Newgate prison - about the triple iron - that was a sort of three-corned gallows at Tyburn where they could hang nine people at a time. The hangman was always called Jack Ketch and he hung the criminals for at least half-an-hour before allowing them to be cut down. This was in the days before dropping the mauls to break their necks. They were usually hoisted up slowly from the back of a cart. Occasionally - just occasionally a man or woman would still be alive when friends cut them down.'

'One of these people - a man called Half-Hanged Smith - recounted his feelings on being taken to the very point of death.' He pecked up an open book which rested on the floor on the side of the bed, and began to read.

'When I was turned off/hung I was aware of very great pain, occasioned by the weight of my body - and felt my spirits in a strange commotion, violently pressing upwards. These, having forced their way, to my head I saw, on a sudden, a great blaze or glaring light, which seemed to go out of my eyes with a flash - and then I lost all sense of pain. I saw my soul rising upwards into the ether - then I was cut down and began to come to myself, the soul returning the blood and spirits forcing themselves into their former channels, put me, by a sort of pricking or shooting, to such intolerable pain that I could have wished those hanged who had cut me down.'

'That night I told John he had to abandon his hermetic studies or I would have him committed to an asylum. He looked at me as if I had just betrayed him - a sort of hurt, bewildered expression - but you understood. Ray, I had to shock him out of it. I had to be blunt and

blunt, not kind, and to prove it to him. I telephoned our doctor there and then to arrange an appointment with a psychiatrist. John just stared at me with that helpless expression still on his face. Then he muttered something about being sorry, and, yes, he would get rid of the books the following morning. Naturally, I cancelled the doctor's appointment immediately. Afterwards we made love - as well as we've always done. She hesitated, then nodded. 'I tell you that so you'll realize we were reconciled.'

'What happened next?' I asked. Her eyes were glimmering in the firelight. I think she was upset but her voice remained clear and even.

'Outwardly, he seemed to have put his obsession aside but secretly he had applied for a post in the British Consulate in Sarajevo. Ray I'd like to ask you a direct question. Do you find me attractive. I mean, do I repel you in any way? Please answer honestly.' I thought over the answer for a full two seconds.

'I think you're one of the most exciting women I've ever met.' My answer was staccato.

'Thank you,' she said quietly.

After she was asleep I sat up and stared across the fire at our Papuan companion. He gazed back at me placidly.

'I wonder what a man who has witnessed his soul looks like?' I said softly. 'Does his body bleach to become white as an albino's? Does it become brittle, hard, like a diamond, with no feelings or dent? What do you think, Chen?'

His broad face crossed a fraction and there was the hint of a smile just below its surface.

'I think -' I continued, 'that a man who has seen his own soul - would have to be mad. I think that John Freeman is already mad. I think he is as cuckoo as an early spring Cherry Sarvey.' I tapped the side of my head. Suddenly the smile was there, full, and the two rows of small teeth above white as the firelight. I nodded, returning the smile, then lay back and stared at the stars, wondering why we lived longer. I should be dragged deeper into this morass of strange human activity known as the search for the truth by others of my kind. Around me I could hear the desert wind whispering dust into the dry shrubs, the insect world teeming amongst the shale. This was no Sahara with high golden dunes adding mystery to an empty quarter - it was a rocky, grey volcanic area as dark and depressing as a deserted railway yard. This was no place to search for the truth, to discover one's eternal soul. Something scuttled amongst the rocks. I murmured two verses memorised from the Koran, and then promptly fell asleep.

In the arid wasteland there is not a great deal to occupy one's attention. The scenery is endless, featureless and dull. Only our eyes were visible from beneath the sashes we wore to prevent the evaporation of our sweat and we allowed the horses to maintain a slow walking pace in order not to tire them. Only the wind offered one variation of elemental noise. The occupation of one's mind was dependent upon material fed into it around the evening camp fire. During the long days an imagination constructed the scaffolds of eighteenth century England where the theft of single shillings was enough to ensure their constant usage. Jane Bates had read some of her

husband's books and she told me of men, women and children who went to the gallows dancing, crying, singing, shouting abuse, shivering in terror, silently dignified – every emotional display of which a human is capable. She told me of Jonathan Wild, the self-styled Thief-taker General, responsible for many such hangings, and who was himself finally "trussed off" by Jack Ketch. She told me of the "Ballad of the Long Drop" that concludes "We dropped her, for we drop them straight for love as well as hate." These images haunted my waking hours as well as my dreams. I filled the road, the naked countryside of the empty quarter, with pictures from my head. There were trees springing out of every rock and from dense trees swung corpses of various sizes and either sex. She made me a child again, with new nightmares and new dependencies.

For the next two weeks we travelled from well to well asking questions of strangers. I would exchange greetings with hill inhabitants, then ask them in Arabic if they had seen a crazy European, a mad Christian, in the vicinity. Am you of the Faith? they would ask suspiciously. When I confirmed I was, they said, "But aren't all Christians crazy?" After which I would get my information. Or not, as the case was.

We moved cautiously, for the hills were the haunt of leers, fierce nomads, not in openly hostile but easily provoked. In such harsh conditions hot tempers lived just below the surface and violence was a spontaneous, emotional and unpredictable reaction to minor irritations. "I am against my cousin," went the local saying "but my cousin and I are against the stranger."

The two aspects of the journey which bothered Jane Reece the most was firstly not being able to wash herself or her clothes to the degree of cleanliness she considered acceptable, and secondly, my offence with Islam. She would stamp around me imperiously during morning prayer and afterwards would remark derogatorily upon the intelligence level of devout, pious idiots that believed in magic. I tried to explain that, despite the bad publicity Islam had received over the last decade it was essentially a simple working-man's religion and providing one carried out the five main duties required of a follower, a place in Heaven was assured. Much of what she disliked about it did not stem from Islam itself but from the various cultural roots of countries in which it was practiced. The only true religion was atheism, she said. Then, to underline her contempt, one morning she situated herself between my prayers and Mecca, stripped completely, squatted, and washed herself over a bowl as I did my Salams. She made her point, she had destroyed my religious concentration with a casual display. She was magnificently disdainful. The two-fingered scoundrel. She could sneer like no other woman I had ever met and it made her absolutely desirable.

Finally our search took us to a village by a small artisan well at the foot of the Salala mountains. I made enquiries in the suk and was informed that a man, a foreigner, was living in some caves about thirty minutes ride from the village. Although the conversation had been conducted in Arabic, Jane had caught the gist from the gestures.

"He's here, isn't he?"

"We don't know if it's him. Let me go and see this man first. It might not be John."

She stared into my eyes. "Are you afraid of what condition you'll find him in? You must know my threshold by now. I'm difficult to shock." I looked away from her. Charlotte was squatting on the ground by a patch of dates that had been left to dry in the sun. He picked one up and crunched it between his teeth before spitting it back out with a look of distaste.

"Let me go first," I repeated. I wanted to meet John Freeman without Jane there to affect his personality. From her reports he seemed a weak man, with barely enough willpower to run away from stronger forces. But a personality is not immovable; it changes shape according to the influences in which it is subjected. John Freeman might well have been quite a strong character, outside of Jane's shadow.

"We'll go with you," she stated. "You can go in first if you think you're going to find him in horrible circumstances – but I'm sure he'll be all right. He's not the sort of man to mutilate himself. He doesn't like deterioration."

"It's a cave in the hills," I said, and we collected our horses from the boy who was watering them and rode off in the direction indicated by my informant in the suk.

The caves looked as though they had all been uninhabited at one time. Their entrances bore the marks of having been bricked into doorways. There were about two dozen of them on a ledge several hundred feet up, accessible by a steep path. Behind them a range of dark red mountains flowed in petrified giant waves. We left the horses at the foot.

"Wait here," I ordered. One of the higher caves had a heavy curtain hanging over its entrance and I guessed that was the one we wanted. I pulled the heavy curtain aside and entered.

The atmosphere in the cave was stifling. I could see little at first, the only light coming from a foul-smelling candle on a small rock shelf at the rear. Then, gradually I perceived some furniture: a chair and table, a raffia spring bed, and night-sticker end, as deep as the cave went into the rock face, a weird contraption of pulleys, ropes, beams and levers. At first glance it resembled one of those early wooden printing presses one sees in museums – except that it was too tall, much too tall, and there was a sinister import to the angles of the beams and the way the rope stretched tautly between them. The whole device appeared to be bolted into the rock wall for support.

I breathed deeply, trying to find some air that was not thick with the heavy, nasty smell which filled the cave. There was a movement a few feet to my left and a man stepped out of a shadowy recess into the candle light. We regarded one another without speaking for a few moments. He stood straight and lean, and wore a dark ragged beard, encumbered by long, unkempt hair. His eyes were deep as his face, but clear and bright. There was a strong line in his cheekbones and his shoulders were firm. From his physical stance, he did not look a weak man. His appearance implied confidence and assurance. I guessed he was weak only in comparison to his wife. Nor was there any indication that he was insane but I had yet to hear him speak.

"You like my machine?" he questioned in Arabic.

I nodded. "Ray Orset," I said, extending a hand. "I've been looking for you."

He started and then said, "My God, English? I thought you were an Arab. I looked down at my filthy and dust-grimed hands. Beneath the dirt and headcloth I could have been any nationality. I looked up again. "I've brought your wife. She's outside."

"Jane? Here? Please, opening into his eyes and he looked like a cornered wild creature about to bolt. Then he started to get control of himself and slumped down in the chair.

"I suppose she wants me to go with her," he said, gloomily.

"I've no idea what she wants. My instructions were to find you, that's all. What happens now is between you two."

"Between us two," he repeated, but there was more than a suggestion of irony in his tone.

"She's concerned for you. . . . For your state of mind."

"I know, that's why I came here. 'He slammed a fist down on the table. 'My God, is there nowhere I can go to escape her?' He stood up and waved his arms. 'Up a mountain in Tibet? Down a trench in the Pacific Ocean? Where? Where can I go and not be found out? This is one of the most godforsaken, lousy places on the Earth, and still she finds me.'"

"She's a very determined woman," I said stiffly. "And I might add, a very beautiful one."

He looked at me with a peculiar expression on his face, over his left shoulder, for a few moments, then shook his head. "No. You're probably too old, more or less the price. Yes, she's beautiful. . . . and her determination

is part of that beauty. I once thought I could never live without her. I was right. I can't."

"But . . ." I indicated that he was here.

"This?" He let out a short, humorless laugh. "This is not living. Existing, yes, but not living."

"Your choice, though."

"Yes, my choice. But it seems as though I do not have the freedom to choose. Okay," he said in a resigned voice, "tell her to come in. I'll talk to her."

Before I left I said, "Have you used that thing back there?"

"So she's told you about my . . . hobby? Several times. I had it constructed by a local carpenter. The wood wasn't easy or cheap to come by. However, it works well. It's one that doesn't function properly. I lack courage, Mr. . . ."

"Diget. Evidently he forgot names quickly."

"...consequently, I always pull the releasing lever before time. There is that moment when I can stare Death in the face, yet still turn around and walk away."

"So I understand."

"No, you don't understand. No-one does, but then I'm not looking for understanding. I don't give that."

He snapped his fingers. His voice was dry and crisp. "All I want is to be left alone to experiment. That's why the entrance is covered. The locals wander up here sometimes, out of curiosity. I can't discourage them physically. . . . wouldn't want to. So I have to hide."

"You actually hang yourself?"

"For a few seconds. He lifted his head and looked over red wheels around his neck. I must have missed because he laughed.



"Is it painful?" Despite my abhorrence of his particular form of insanity, I was markedly fascinated. "Of course it is. It hurts like hell! But I can't think of any other method of doing it without leaving my body mutilated or my internal organs damaged. I have to do it, Mr. Chota. Make no mistake about that. When you've seen a man hang, as I have, you'd know by his face that there is a point where the expression of pain changes to one of wonder - then the muscles slump into death. I have to reach that point. I have to. Before the man becomes the puppet. All our lives we live in the shadow of death. I must see what casts that shadow."

I took a long look at the bizarre contortion that reared like a giant prying mania, throwing its own scuffed shadows over the cave wall, and severely shuddered. I could imagine the noise of creaking joints, the sound of stretching rope, as his body hung from the thick topleams. What frightening, but impressive, was there in my own brain waiting for a specific event to trigger them with a delicate psychological finger? That intricate device, the human mind, with its multiplicity of images, its complexities of disturbances, its fine networks of nerves, was my inheritance as well as his. Was it possible that one day I would want to witness my own psyche in ascendancy?

Freeman was studying my face with an expression I could only attribute to some ugly demon that sears in his spirit and rose occasionally to the surface.

"You want to see me use it," he said. "It was not a question. He strode quickly to the machine, muttering, 'Maybe with an audience...'?" Before I could stop him he had stepped up onto a small platform and pulled a noose tight around his neck, taking up the slack on a wooden windlass.

"Freeman!"

"Quiet!" he silenced me curtly. The platform slipped downwards with a snap that made me jump. The rope tightened and his face seemed to swell to twice its size, as if it were gorged with blood. His eyes grew wide and lost their natural lustre. In his right hand he grasped a short lever.

During the thirty seconds he hung before me, his limbs as limp as bags, I heard the candle spattering away his life. In the total atmosphere of the cave I had the fancy that I could smell Death coming, creeping in like an evil mardian wind from the cracks in the rock walls, from beneath the ancient stones, to claim a deserter to its cause. Thirty seconds - thirty years. And all that time there was a sound coming from his mouth, like a dog would make with a bone stuck in its throat. Then I heard the wooden ratchets slip and he fell the six inches to the floor, the windlass clacking and spinning on its axle. He had pressed the release lever. He groaned, squirmed for an instant, then reached up slowly to his throat to loosen the noose. I left the room quickly and returned to Jane Rence and her primitive Indian.

"Please pay me my three hundred reals. I want to go. He is there, believe me."

"I believe you, Ray, but don't leave us now. We have to return."

"What's Chota doing here?" I asked, bluntly.

"I think you've guessed that John is a born failure. It doesn't lower his stature in my eyes because I can see other qualities in him that are just as important,

but it's a fact. I know he would not be able to do the things he wants to do - (he knew I hate it)"

"No. He hasn't," I said, quietly.

"I couldn't bear this obsession, so in order to save John, I made a decision to ease it. In order to help him, I've brought Chota, who is an expert in death. John may not be able to bring himself to the point where life crosses death - but Chota can do it for him."

My stomach turned at the thought of it. She was right, I had had a hunch what Chota was for, but to hear her expressing it coldly and, I suppose, logically made me feel ill.

"The Papuan Indians torture their enemies," she explained, "by bringing them continually to the very edge of death, but never allowing them to slip over it. If they did they would lose them and the whole point of the ceremony is to make you an inviolable. There are the garrotes, which I believe is similar enough to the hangman's noose to satisfy John's... requirements. If John refuses to come back with me to be treated, I shall allow Chota to - to give him what he wants. Hopefully his mind will then be secured of the insanity that's trapped within it." She paused. "Will you wait?"

Like a fool I said, "Yes," but my mind was in a turmoil and she had more hold over me than she imagined. "I'll wait. Aren't you afraid that the cure might be more fatal than the disease?"

"Chota knows what to do and how to do it. I have complete faith in him. His tribe have been doing this sort of thing for centuries."

That night, I believe a man was taken to the edge of a cliff and looked down upon the rocks of Death below. Then the man turned and walked away. From my camp just below the cave I could hear the terrible sounds that accompanied the experiment above me. I did not know until later that he had had a companion as I tried to ignore the pattern of noises which attended a strangulation. A sequence that begins with a sharp "Kohhh" like a baby's cough, then the slow rattle of phlegm in an old man's throat, then finally, a terrible silence. Silence can have a sound too, if the ears are pressed hard enough against its thin shell. Finally, I took my horse and rode away from them, down to the desert. I could not stand to listen any more, despite my promise to Jane Rence. I ran. My imagination was full of horrible scenes of people being hanged, pressed under blocks of stone, stretched out under a blazing sun with night-shaking rowlike collars crucified, cut in a thousand places, stretched on rocks and wheels, keelhailed, maimed and near-drowned, sliced into ribbons - there were a thousand ways to bring someone to the point of death. The human mind has been remarkably inventive throughout history in finding them out. I slept feverishly that night, with pictures of blades, ropes, and engines of metal and wood spinning in my brain.

The next morning I was woken by a rough hand on my shoulder. I sat up quickly and found myself staring into the ravaged face of something that had once been human. Its features were so twisted and swollen on a gangrene's, the beard and hair a shock of white. Red eyes glared from deep pits of pain, staring, knocking over the hand.

"It is me, Freeman. The voice was so cracked and inarticulate I hardly understood the words."

"Freeman?" I cried, wildly. "What?" "Then I remembered. The crippled figure crouched before me was fresh from the world of suffering and death. Did you?"

"Yes! Yes! I saw." There was an inflexion in the tone. A rising note implying excitement. "You must sell me your assie. Only, there's no money. Please! I'll send the money to you. Where do you live? No, I'll send it to Adea. You can collect it there. Please. The animal."

"Take it," I said. "And water. You'll need water is she following?"

"Not yet." He began removing the mare's hobble with moist, trembling fingers. I sprang up and helped him. Then I had to lift him into the saddle.

"Where will you go?"

"Anywhere," he replied. "I must get away. I must go." There was an urgency behind the words which disturbed me. I gripped his ankle.

"Before you leave, what happened? What did you see?" I was eager to know what secret but richness conferred for him under duress.

"Death. I saw death." There was a thin line of saliva running from the corner of his mouth and I wondered whether I had done the right thing in giving him the horse. In one night his hair had lost its colour and he had assumed the appearance of an old man, wracked with arthritis.

"What did it look like?"

His eyes were damp. "Pain. I never felt such pain before – not physical suffering but an emotional, spiritual hurt, my very self was torn out of the flesh by which it was held so fast. I was forcefully wrenched away from life – a psychic experience which, dear God, I will have to go through at least once more, but next time I shall make sure it quick – a bullet in the brain – a fall from a high place." He gripped my shoulder and pulled me closer to him. "Bring your arms being stripped from your body or your skin peeled away from your face, eyes, limbs – it was like that, only not flesh from flesh, but spirit away from body."

"Then after a long time – so very long – there came a single moment of peace and I was looking into the dark kingdom of Death. It was like – strong into a deep, black mirror – eternity dripping away before me, not beautiful but awesome, terrible in its poise as of the everlasting – then the soul, reflected on the surface of death."

"Yes!" He leaned down, conspiratorially to whisper hoarsely in my ear. "A man and a woman, when they love – when they live together, they begin to merge – their personalities. You understand?"

"Yes. Their eyes, their souls eventually merge – become one, a singleness. I saw my soul – our soul – Jane's, mine. Together. One. A single spirit. You see, she gained me. We did it together but she – there was only one. One soul between us."

"She gained you?" I repeated, shocked. "You mean that Indian, Chota took you both over to death?"

"Yes! Yes!" He jerked upright in the saddle his long white hair flying wild in the dawn air. "She said if I wanted it so badly, if I could not be deterred, then she was going to experience it with me. She has

courage, you see, more than I have – yet, oh God!"

"What? Is she dead? Did Chota go too far?"

"No. No that – the soul. The single spirit. It was all her. There was nothing left of me." With that he gave a sobbing sound and spurred the horse forward.

I stood watching him ride away into the hills, the dust rising around him like morning mist. My body felt numb. This madman – this madwoman. They had entered my life and shattered my peace of mind. I was a Sunni Muslim, my life running according to His plan. Kismet. I followed and was led, and had no need to torture myself with right and wrong paths. I did what was expected of me and my eventual reward would have been assured. I had even steered myself away from Shii Muslims and their fanatical, political approach to the Faith because I did not want my life to reflect the disturbances created by that sect. Now these disturbances, these ugly questions of death in life had crumpled my calm, had destroyed my peace. One of them wore the mask of the curious, the inquisitive, yet all he craved was escape to another place and time, where he would be beyond reach. The other was clothed in good intentions, yet underneath was a naked lust for power of one individual over another. Now I, too, was a hypocrite, secretly wearing the cloak, the guise, of a devout man, which I would gladly have discarded if

through the valley of the shadow – I will fear no evil.

Of course, it is not evil. I fear but death itself. If my soul belonged to Jane Rouse, were Jane Rouse, completely entirely, then I would have no fear. For John Freeman, death will now be oblivion, for he will not exist except as her and she exists only as herself. He will die and then – nothing. No gentle love, no lachrymose hate, no undecipherable peace, but mere ingratiation, no harrowing, ugly fears.

Sometime later she came riding into my camp. Her beauty was still evident but it was warped by a new knowledge. She was not physically bent and treated like Freeman, though there were insights into her her wriths and throat. Her eyes were wide and there was a triumphant ring in her voice.

"He's been here. Did he take you to his house?"

"Yes. What are you going to do now?"

"Follow him, of course."

I shook my head. "I won't loose you. For God's sakes, leave the man alone. Why bound him?"

She gave me a puzzled frown, then a small, tight-lipped smile. I knew why. And the knowledge, evident on her face – in my posture, left me vulnerable to her contempt. Then she was gone, following the tracks he had left. I watched her arrogant pose as she rode high in the saddle, galloping her mount down the dark, grey valley. I was sure I felt only pity for her pride. Not envy. I had to be pity.

Garry Kilworth was one of the winners of the Gallions/Sunday Times SF Competition in 1974, since when his stories have appeared regularly in a wide variety of magazines. He has published four novels, the most recent being *Gamma God*.

OVERTURE FOR 'A MIDSUMMER NIGHTS DREAM'



ANGELA CARTER



all me the Golden Horns'

My mother bore me in the Southern wild but 'she, being mortal, of that boy did die', as my Aunt Titania says, though 'boy' is the cur's, as she's cursing me, then, she's rendering me unambiguous to get the casting director out of a quandary, when 'boy' is correct, as far as it goes... But,

insufficient. Yes, insufficient. Nor as my sweet South in the least wild, oh, never, it is the lovely land where the lemon trees grow multiplied by two, or three, or four: child of the sun am I, and of the breezes, juicy as mangoes, that mythopoetically cause the Coast of Comrades (far away on the porphyry and lapis lazuli Indian shore where everything is brilliant and precious as on a lacquer screen).

My Aunt Titania. Not, I should tell you now, my maternal aunt. No blood bond, then, but my mother's best friend to whom, before she departed, she entrusted me, and therefore always called by me, 'auntie'.

Titania, she, the great, fat, shabby pink and blonde thing, the Memsahib. I call her, Auntie Tit-ti-ti-tania (for her tits are the things you notice first, size of borage balloons). Tit-ti-ti-ti-tania boxed me up in a trunk she bought from the Army and Navy stores, labelled it 'Wanted on Voyage' (yes, indeed) and shipped me here.

Here! - to shoo! - catch my death of cold in this dripping backside wind. Rain, rain, rain, rain, rain!

'Flaming June,' the serotonic finches matter-looking glum, as well they might, poor dears, their little wings all maddled and plastered to their backs, so waterlogged they can hardly take off and, no sooner airborne, than they founder in the pelting downpour crash-land among the fleshy bosken herbs amid much peevish

squeaking. 'Never such weather' - complain the fawns as read the brakes of roads putting on - I must admit - a brave if pastel-coloured floral show amidst the inadequacy of the weather, and the flat dashes of the pale wild rose spill over with the raindrops that have collected upon them as the bushes shudder in the reverberations of dozens and dozens of leamy toy scooters, for no place on their woony anatomies to store a handkerchief and all the ladies have got shocking colds as well as I.

Nothing in my princely, exquisite, peacock-jewelled hereditarily prepared me for the dark grey-English midsummer. A midsummer night, sure, I call it. The whirling nads have wrenched the limbs off even the hugest oaks and brought down altogether the more totent, olms so that they sprawl like collapsed drunks, silkworm diphtheria-died bare rings. Thunder, lightning, and, at night, the blazing stars whizz and bomb the world, nothing temperate about your temperate climate, dear. I snap at Aunt Titania but she blames it all on Uncle Oberon, whose buff expresses itself in thunder and he makes it rain when he abuses himself, which it seems he must do all the time, thinking of me the while, no doubt. Of me!

For Oberon is passing fell and wrath because that she, as her attendant both A lovely boy, stolen from an Indian king;
She never had so sweet a changeling
And jealous Oberon would have the child!

Malformation 'Boy', again, see which isn't the half of it. Furthermore the patriarchal version for it was all between my mother and my auntie, wasn't it? That is the truth.

Besides, is a child to be given? Or taken? Or stolen? Or sold into bondage, for that matter? Are these blonde furies the agents of proto-colonialism in the last millennium dream?

In the face of all this, in order to preserve my con-

plagued integrity, I present a facade of passive apathy.

I am here

I am

I am Harm short for hermaphrodites versus one
sexer, one every, half of each but all complete and
more – much more, than the sum of my parts. This
elegantly retractable appendage, here – is not the tri-
bade a well-developed chi, but the venerable male
reproductive article, while the velvet-lipped and deli-
ciously closable aperture below it is – I assure you, a
viable avenue of the other gender. So there.

Take a look. I'm not say 'Impressure, huh?

And I am called, the Golden Helm. For I am gold all
over, when I was born, was tiny, playful cherubs
filled their cheeks and lungs and blew, blew the papery
sheets of beaten gold all over my infant limbs – to
which they stuck and clung. See me there?

And here I stand, under the dripping trees, in the
long, rank, soaking grass among drooping dappled
and the branched candelabra of the buttresses from
which the gusty rain has knocked off all the petals,
leaving their waxy green heads bald. And the bloody
crane's bill. And the stinging nettles, those Portuguese
men o' war of the woodland, who gave me so many
nasty shocks when I first met them. And pansies
and mustard-seed and innumerable unknown-to-me
weeds, the daisy, washed out pinks, yellow and
Cambridge blues of them, flaring in the underpan-
nings of the trees all soggy and floral as William
Morris wallpaper in an abandoned house. I, in order
to retain my equilibrium and psychic balance, mod-
erate in the vague posture known as The Tree, that is,
no one leg.

Beaver of both nose and target wound and howl
spoon and porringer, in my left hand I hold a lotus
looking a bit the worse for wear by now. My snake
coils round my other arm.

I am golden, stark naked and in-parade

On my golden face, a fixed, archaic grin. Except
when –

Althos!

Demis, occidental common cold versus

Antheo

The Golden Helm stood in the green wood.

This wood is, of course, nowhere near *Althos*,
the original script is a positive mine of false
leads. The wood is really located somewhere in the
English midlands, possibly near Bleichley, where the
great decaying machine was used. Correction: this
wood was located in the English midlands until oak
ash and then were all chopped down to make a
motorway. However, since the wood existed only as a
structure of the imagination, in the first place, it will
remain, in the second place, as a green decorative
margin to the eternity proclaimed by the poet. The
English poet. It is, essentially, an English wood. It is
the English wood.

The English wood is nothing like the dark, necro-
mantic forest in which the Northern European im-
agination begins and ends, where its dead and witches
live and Baba-yaga stalks about in her house with
chicken's feet looking for children in order to eat
them. No. There is a qualitative, not a quantitative
difference between this wood and that forest, over

and above the fact that a wood contains fewer trees
than a forest and covers less ground, although there
are some of the causes of the difference, yet they do
not explain the effects.

For example, an English wood, however marvel-
lous, however metamorphic, cannot, by definition, be
trackless, although it might well be formally laby-
rithine – a maze. Yet there is always a way out of a
maze, and, even if you cannot find it for a while, you
know that it is there. A maze is a construct of the
human mind, and not unlike it, lost in a wood, this
analogy will always console. But to be lost in a forest
is to be lost to this world, to be abandoned by the light,
to lose yourself utterly with an guarantee you will
either find yourself or else be found, to be committed
against your will – or, worse, of your own desire – to
a perpetual absence from humanity, an essential
catastrophe, for the forest is as entirely boundless as
the human heart.

But the wood, *ah!* the wood, now, is finally you
purposely mislay the way in the wood, for the sheer
pleasure of moving, the temporary confusion of direc-
tion is in the nature of a holiday, from which you will
come home refreshed, with your pockets full of nuts
and berries, wild flowers – the cost feather of absurd in
your cap. That forest is haunted, this wood is en-
chanted.

The very perils of the wood are – in fact, only as
many audio-visual aids to a pleasurable tribulation of
mind, for the swift rattle of an ascending pleasant
soft drop of an owl, red glide of a fox, these may "give
you a fright" but here neither hobgoblin nor fiend
can daunt your spirit because the English lobs
and hobs reflect nothing more than a secular faith in
the absence of harm in nature, part of the credit sheet
of a temperate climate (hear that, *Herm?*) and, since
the last English wall was killed, there is nothing
awful among the trees to terrify you. All is mellow in
the filtered light, where Robin Wood, the kindly
spirit, lurks in the green shade: this wood is kind to
lovers.

Indeed, you might call the wood the common garden
of the village, a garden almost as intentionally wild as
one of Bacon's "natural wildernesses" where every
tree carries a gravel in its head and all the flowers have
pet names, nothing is unknown – this kind of wild-
ness is not an *athrosis*.

And allows something to eat? Mother Nature's
grocery store, cornel for steep mushrooms, dandelion
and chickweed salads, mint and thyme for
seasoning, wild strawberries and blackberries for
dessert and, in the natural, a plenitude of nuts.
Nutschmeddars, in the English wood need not have
combined his appetite to grief.

The English wood, then, offers us a glimpse of a
green, unfallen world a little closer to Paradise than
we are.

Such is the English wood in which we see the
poet's fumes, blurring figures, rude machi-
nals, this is the Shakespearean wood of nine-
teenth century nostalgia, which disaffected from the
supernatural all their nests, stevens until they look
exactly as they do in those photographs of fairy folk
that so enraptured Cean Doyle.

Enter these enchanted woods

However, as it turned out, the Victorians did not

leave the woods in quite the state they might have wished to find them.

The Puck was obviously fascinated by the exotic visitor. In some respects it was the attraction of opposites, for, whereas the Golden Herm was so old, the Puck was hairy, on these chill nights of summer. Puck was the only one kept warm at all inside his hairy pelt. Harry Shaggy. Especially about the thighs. [And him on the pelt of his hands.]

Shaggy as a Sherland pony when asked and some times gone on all fours. When he goes on all fours, he occupies or occupies her.

He is the job, the lubber friend, and sometimes he plays at being the nut-brown house-apricot for whom a bowl of milk is left outside the door, although if you want to be rid of him, you must leave him a pair of trousers, for thanks the gift of trousers as so small to his sex, of which he is most proud. Nothing in his luxuriant pubic curls, that gleam with the deep-fried gloss of the woodcarvings of Gauding Gibbons, see his testicles, wrinkled ripe as melons.

Puck loves broken-poke and pork-and-beef: he has relations all over the place – in Iceland, the pike, the Devonshire pike, the spook of the Low Courtesans are all his next of kin and not one of them up to any good. That Puck!

The tender little acquisition that cluster round the Queen of the Fomies do not like to play with the Puck because he is so rough and rips their painted wings in games of tag and pulls the phantasmal legs off the grey goats that draw Titania's nose coach through the air, kisses the girls and makes them cry, creeps up and swings between the pure, ethereal like kangaroo spruce above Titania's bed so the midnight fall and scatter in a drenching shower and up she wakes. Spiteful!

Puck is no more polymorphously perverse than any of the rest of these sub-microscopic parasites, his peers, yet there is something peculiarly sexual and offensive about his buggery and his urination and his masturbation and his scopophilia and his – indeed, my very paper would blush, go pink as an ivy-rose, should I write down upon it some of the things Puck gets up to down in the woods by the river, since he is distantly related to the great bed god Pan and, when in the mood, behaves in indeed an Altheman manner uncommon in an English wood, although familiar in the English public school.

By the Puck's phallic orientation, you know him for a creature of King Oberon's.

Harry Puck fell in love with Golden Herm and often came to frolic round the lovely living statue in the moonlit glade, although he could not, happily for the Herm, get near enough to touch because Titania thoughtfully had thrown a magical cordian suture round her lovely adoptive so that she was, as it were, in an invisible glass case, such as she might find herself, some centuries later, in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Against this transparent, unchangeable barrier, the Puck often flattered still further his already snub nose.

The Herm removed his/her left foot from its snug nest in her/his crotch and placed it on the ground. With one simple, fluent, graceful movement of intention, she shifted on to the other leg. The letuce and the snake, on either arm, stayed where they were.

The Puck, pressed against Titania's magic, aghast heavily, stepped back a few paces and began to sing, gently play with himself.

How you seen forty years! We would call a corker apt!

And no passing, clumsy mortal tramping through the wood on its great heavy feet scattering the faeries who twitter assembly as bats in their fright – just as such a mortal would not hear the faeries, so he would never spot the unafraid Herm sticking stuck still as a fence.

And if you did chance to spy him/her, you would think the little yellow idol was a Mithraian dropped from a gypsy pocket, perhaps, or a clown fallen off a girl's basket, or else the gift from inside a very expensive pornography cracker.

Yet, if you picked up the beautiful object and held it on the palm of your hand – you would feel how warm it was, as if somebody had been holding it tight before you came and only just put it down.

And, if you watched long enough, you would see the golden aquines of the evildoer move.

At which a ward of strangeness would rise up and blow away the wood and all within it.

Just as your shadow can grow big and then shrink to almost nothing and then swell back up again, so can these shadows: these insubstantial bubbles of the earth, these "beings" to whom the verbs, to be, may not properly be applied, since in our sense they are not. They cannot be, cannot, themselves cast shadows, for who has seen the shadow of a shadow? Their existence necessarily must – do you believe in furies? Their lives lead always just teasingly almost out of the corners of the eyes of their observers, and it is possible they were only, all the time, a trick of the light, such half being, with such a lack of public acknowledgement, is not conducive to any kind of visual consistency among them. So they may take what shapes they please.

The Puck can turn himself into anything he likes a three-legged stool, in order to perpetrate the celebrated trick ("Then slip I from her beam, down topples she") so beloved on the lower forms of grammar schools when the play is read aloud round the class because it is suitable for children since it is about faeries, a baby, first, a grand piano – something!

Except the lover of the Golden Herm.

In his spare moments, when he was not off about his Master's various businesses, the Puck, warily lingering outside the Herm's magic circle like an archer outside a candy shop, concluded that, in order to take full advantage of the sexual facilities offered him by the Herm, should the barrier between them ever be broken – and the Puck's motto was, "Be prepared!" – if there was to be intercourse between himself and the Herm, then the Herm's partner would require a similar set of equipment to the Herm in order to effect maximally satisfactory congress.

The Puck further concluded that the equipment of the Herm's hypothetical partner would need, however, to be attached in reverse order to that of the Herm, in order to procure a perfect fit and no lurching, the Puck, a constant imaginative spy on mortal couples come to the wood to make the best with two backs to what they mistakenly considered privacy, had noticed

there is a vexed question of handedness about carouses, that all right-handed lovers truly require left-handed partners during the preliminaries to the act, and Mother Nature, when she cast the human mould, took no account of foreplay, which alone distinguishes us from the beasts when we are being beastly.

Try, try as he might, try and try again, the Puck could not get it quite right: although, after strenuous effort, he at last succeeded in turning himself into a perfect amulectum of the Herm and would, at odd moments, adopt the Herm's form and posture and stand facing him in the wood, a living mirror of the living statue: except for the fierce election the satyr-mimic Puck would not subdue when in the presence of his love.

The Herm continued to smile inscrutably except when he sneezed.

But all of them can grow leg if then shrink down to, the size of dots of less than dots, again. Every last one of them is of such elastic since incorporeal substance. Consider the Queen of the Fairies.

Her very name Titania, bears witness to her descent from the great race of Titans and "descend" might seem apt enough, at first, to describe the declension when she manifests herself under her alias, Mab, or, in Wales, Mabli, and rules over the other diminutives herein (if the size of the solitary in an engagement ring, as infinitely little as her footbeams were in reality large.

"Now, I do call my horned master, the Herm of Plenty, but, as for my mistress—" said the Puck, in his inimitable Worcestershire drawl.

But, like a Japanese water-flower dropped in a glass of water, Titania expands.

In the down wood treaded with howling moonlight the tumbling, tumbling babies of the berry-rich trip over the hem of her dress, which is no more nor less than the margin of the wood itself, they stumble in the tangled grass as they play with the coveys, the quick brown fox-cubs, the russet field mice and the wee scraps of grey voles, blind velvet moles and striped brock with his quivering snout—all the denizens of the woodland are her endorserings, and the birds that flutter round her head, settle on her shoulders and make their nests in her great abundance of disordered hair in which are planted poppies and the ears of wheat.

The arrival of the Queen is announced by an fanfare of trumpets but the ash-soft lullaby of wood doves and the liquid colicatum blackbird. Moonlight falls like milk upon her naked breasts.

She is like a double bed, or a table laid for a seedling breakfast, or, a fertility chair.

In her eyes are babies. When she looks at you, you helplessly reduplicate. Her eyes provoke an exhilarating Correction, used to provoke.

But that was last year, not this year. Frodo has blasted the fruit blossom, man has rotted all the corn so her lord and is not gold but greenish and phosphor-scent with blight. The acres of the eye have been swathed with ergot and this year, eating bread will make you mad. The floods broke down the Bridge of Worms. The beasts refuse to couple: the cows refuse the bull, and the bull keeps himself to himself. Even the goats, hitherto synonymous with lechery, prefer to



cent up with a good book. The very worms no longer agitate the human where they used to writh in blind love in the wood, a chaotic, conventional calm reigns over everything, as if foul weather had put everybody off.

The wonderful goddess manifested herself with an owl on her shoulder and an apronful of roses and of babies so rosy the children could scarcely be distinguished from the flowers. She picked up the child of her defunct friend. The Herm stood on one leg on the palm of Titania's hand and snarled the untranslatable, if meant, snarl of the figures in Hindu erotic sculpture. "My husband shall not have you!" cried Titania. "He shall! I shall keep you!"

At that, thunder crashed, the heavens, which, for a brief moment had unrolled themselves up, now re-spread again with redoubled fury and all the drenched babies huddled in Titania's paradise began to cough and sneeze, the worms in the meadows woke up at the clamour and commenced to gnaw.

But the Queen stowed the tiny Herm safe away between her breasts as if a/ke were a locket and commenced to diminish until she was a suitable size to enjoy her queen or nephew or nephew-in-laid chess as the clarity of an ecore-cup.

"She cannot put herms on her husband: for he is antlered, already," opined the Puck, changing back into himself and skipping across the glade to the head of his master. For no red-back now runs its head behind that games bank to watch these goings-on. Oberon is antlered like a ten-point stag.

Among the props of the Globe Theatre, along with the thunder-making machine and the beardskins is listed a "robe for to go invisible". By his coat you understand that Oberon is forevermore unseen as he broods regalistical but impenetrable above the scarcely discernible coverings among last year's oak leaves that conceal his wife and the golden bone of contention that has come between these elemental lovers.

High in the thick of a dripping hedge of honey-suckle, a wee creature was extracting a tonic, numinous, luxuriantly perfumed melody from the panpipes of the wild woodbine. The tune took off as the player convulsed with ugly coughing. He gobbled phlegm, that flew through the air until its trajectory was interrupted by a cowslip in whose forked ear the translucent postule clung. The infirmus then took up his tooting again.

The Herm's skin is made of beaten gold but the flesh beneath it has been manifested in red shell, yellow turnip, cloven, commander, cumin, leek-grink ginger, meat, nutmeg, ellspice, coars-coars, garlin, tamarind, coconut, condiment, lemon grass, galangal and now and then you get - phers! - a whiff of asakotide. Not stuff! Were the Herm to be served poked upon a lordly platter and garnished with shreds of its own outer casing, s/he would then resemble that royal dish, maglin birchen which is decorated with edible gold shavings in order, so they say, to aid digestion, but, since the Herm is vegetarian, s/he would never be able to taste himself. Yet nothing so deliciously aromatic as the Herm has ever been scented before in England's green and pleasant land: where, at this historical period, boiled cabbage and bacon is the staple fare. S/he is hot, and sweet, as if drenched

in honey, but Oberon is the colour of ashes.

The Puck, tormented for lack of Herm, pulled up a mandrake and sank his prodigious tool in the cleft of the reluctant root, which shrieked mournfully but to no avail as old shaggy legs had his way with it.

Distemperance with her. It's raining, it's pouring, the earth is in estrangement from itself, the withered luck tumble out of the Queen's apron and not on the much for Oberon has put a stop to reproduction. But still Titania hugs the Herm to her shivering bosoms and will not let her husband have the wee thing, not even for one minute, did she not give a sacred promise to a friend?

What does the Herm want?

The Herm wants to know what "want" means.

"I am unfamiliar with the concept of desire. I am the unique and perfect, paradigmatic Hermaphrodite, provoking on all sides desire yet myself transcendent the unmoved mover, the still eye of the tempest, exemplifying and self-sufficient the beginning and the end."

Titania, despairing of the Herm's male aspect, installed a tentative forefinger on the female aspect. The Herm felt bored.

Oberon watched the oak leaves quaver and said nothing, choked as he was with balked longing for the golden, hail and holly shing with its salubrious perfume. He took off his invisible disguise and made himself apparent and bulked up on the night sky over the wood, arms akimbo, blotting out the moon to menace his wife, he wearing nothing but his buckskins and his great codpiece: the money ankles on his forehead went to the hilt of it, he wears a crown made out of yellowish vertebrae of small mammals, down from beneath which his black hair drops straight as light. Since he is in his assign aspect, he has put on, furthermore, a necklace of suggestively little skulls which might be those of babies he has plucked from human cradles. Do not forget the Germans call him Eck-lung.

His face, breast and thighs he has decked with charcoal. Oberon, lord of the grave silence of endless night, Lord of Plutonic dark. His long hair never saw a comb but he has this peculiarity - no hair at all on either chop or chin, nor his shirt, neither, but all his face bald as an egg, except for his eyebrows, that meet in the middle.

Who in their right minds would trust a child to him?

When Oberon cheers up, a bit, he lets the sun come out and then he'll hang bells adverb bells along his codpiece and they go jangle jangle jangle when he walks up and down and round about the pretty clanking scunch hang in the air twiggling like horsemuck.

And if these are not the constraints of the dream, then surely you have forgotten your own dream.

The Puck, too, warming and thwarted as he was found himself helplessly forcing himself into the thing he longed for: and, under the fairly twitching oak leaves, became yellow, metallic, double-sound and extravagantly precious-looking. There the Puck stood, on one leg, the living image of the Herm, and pattered.

When Oberon caught sight of that, he stooped down,

picked up Park and stood firm, a simulated vomit
Toss on his palm. A misty look came into Obasan's
eye. The Park knew he had no option but to go through
with it.

A tiskos!
Titania wiped the Horn's nose with the edge
of her petticoat, on which the flowers are all
drooping and shedding embroidery stitches: the fruits
are cackering and spotting and unravelling, for, if
Obasan is the Horn of Plenty, then Titania is the
Cauldron of Generation and, unless he gives her a stir,
now and then, with his goat pot stick, the children
will go off the boil.

Nothing doing, said the Horn.

Lie close and sleep, said Titania to the Horn. My
fays shall lullaby you as we cuddle up on my mattress
of dandelion down.

The diaggled farnas obediently started on an on-
a chorus of "Ye spotted snakes with double tongue",
but were all so afflicted by coughing and sneezing
and rawness of the throat and cheamy eyes and gasp-
ing for breath and all the other symptoms of rampant
influenza that their hoarse voices petered out before
they reached the bit about the newts and after that the
only sound in the entire wood was the pit-pettering of
the coles on the leaves.

The orchestra has laid down its instruments. The
curtain rises. The play begins.

*Angela Carter is the first author to appear twice in
Interzone. The stories published here form part of a
wider series which will eventually be collected into a
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NO COWARD SOUL

Josephine
Saxton

I am standing in the centre of a howling desert storm, metallic grains tearing at it to strip me to the bone. I can find little air to breathe and that air full of poisonous gases. My lungs burn, my senses turn in on themselves like struck snakes, whipping back at me for subjecting them to such awful horrors. But I am on a quest and shall persist in the face of everything. I am stronger than I have ever been, my powers of concentration and my determination will carry me through. I come here seeking powers that no human being has yet had, and I must not fail. Like a knight in ancient times I must run the gauntlet, I must be fearless.

If only my limbs would behave properly, they thrust themselves against my control, grotesquely so that I laugh. It must be the atmosphere in this dreadful land, this frightful country on the deserted planet of Amogdalanos.

Everything here is designed to trap the traveller. I am deceived by strange visions, tortured by horrible thirst and hunger, by sexual desires which I feel will drive me insane but which sweep away as suddenly as they took me, leaving me miserably drained and as dry as an old dying woman. I go forward, dragging myself through the tempest, wary of the ground which has hidden quicksands, unseen steps, rocks which seem to move into my path as if with intent to trip me, hurt me. Everything here is hostile. Everything is against my plan, but I shall win.

Nadine prepares everything very carefully as she has trained herself to do. The room is entirely sterile. In the corner is an ozone-ioniser quietly aiding continual purification. This entire project is a work of art. The carefully placed automatic film cameras will record every stage, for she wishes to exhibit the process as well as the result. She has written notes of all her intentions. It is only a matter of checking and double-checking; taking everything a step at a time. She has taken the appropriate light-

hypnotic drugs, her hair is very short and washed with alcohol, she has administered local anaesthetic. The mirrors are all in place so that she can see exactly what she is doing, magnifying glasses are to hand and the carefully tailored arm rests are covered in sterilised cloths. She lowers herself into the specially constructed couch, placing her head on the moulded pad. She is an expert with fibreglass and resin and made the couch herself. All the instruments are sharp. The telephone is silenced, the door is locked.

"So now, Nadine, you can begin," she says aloud.

She takes a scalpel and with great care makes an incision in the image in the mirror. It is the top of her own head. When the flaps are laid back all neatly clipped and the area cleared of blood, she takes a tiny circular saw, adapted from a dentist's drill, and cuts a large area out of her skull, lifting the object which resembles something found on a beach, and laying it on a steel dish. The look of it amazes her. The only discomfort so far was the noise of the saw which she hates; the whirling sets her teeth on edge but that is over. As she takes the first fine probe from the stopped-down electrical rack she has to calm herself. It is very exciting.

This is the culmination of three years of secret work. Autopsy is not unknown in the world of art, but this will be the most sophisticated project to date. She has spent a lot of time practising and researching, picking up knowledge from medical friends, reading, and performing similar operations on dogs and cats. She knows the process by heart. There are important differences between animal brains and her own but basically everything is the same, and she is perfectly familiar with human models. First of all, it is a matter of bypassing certain areas of this delightful grey matter, to reach a deeply seated spot.

There were figures approaching. This was to be the last confrontation.

"Say who you are?" a loud voice demanded.

She prepared to present herself with dignity. A lot would depend upon what she said and how she did it, but someone else spoke in different accents.

"What the bloody hell are you doing here?" The voice was very cultured, very angry. And also someone else.

"You stupid twot comic! down went right, yer've bleedin' well asked for it!" Somebody leapt at her and gave her a clout on the arm with something heavy and she squealed, all dignity forgotten, anger surging in response.

"I am Nadine Quilling, an artist, and I am here seeking peace. Her mouth filled with sand out of the gate. The attacker grabbed her clothing and the pain in her arm was excruciating. "I'll bleedin' well do for yer — got any cash?"

"No. Nothing." She was pushing backwards and fell over a sharp rock, managed to roll onto hands and knees. Four got her by the skin, hair rising like pins. Was this how it should be? Where was the rational discussion?

"Get to your feet woman, immediately, and explain yourself." She did so, to face a man in tweeds with a bristly moustache. He carried a shotgun; his face was scarlet with fury. The storm dropped somewhat and she spat out and:

"If you trespass on my land you will be shot as like as not. I don't tolerate poachers, I don't call the police, I act. You'd best be off or you might get a blast up the behind. What are you doing here?"

I'm on a mission. I seek peace.

"Bloody cheeky I suppose. No patience with 'em."

The man did not seem to be aware of the others pointing on his land. The youth with the weapon was doing a kind of war dance, laughing to himself. "She seeks peace, too, hee she seeks peace."

He was painted in an extraordinary manner, his face a canvas, his skull almost shaved and dyed with some coloring which she could not decipher. The third person was more menacing, he had an unhealthy spotted complexion and mean eyes like a furtive rat. His clothes were peaty, everything gummy and worn. He looked cold and underfed.

"No money. There's with no money pays somehow."

He moved his hand and brought to life a flint-knife which he gestured with in a sly gentle manner. It made the blood run cold. The three were obviously all together, but they were all against her.

"Somebody like you shouldn't be out here at night, it's dangerous for those that don't belong." Suddenly the painted youth went for her but she was faster than he was and grabbed the thing in his hand, a heavy coil. All peace missions forgotten, she swung it him at the same time as aiming a kick at the shotgun which went off with a dreadful sound mingling with the screams of the man with the knife who got the full blast. The youth went down with a grunt and she turned to the tweedy squab but he was running away.

Things were not going at all well, but at least she was whole and safe.

Notes on my Autosurgery, by Nadine Quilling.

I have always had a violent nature. All my life I have been the victim of a terrible temper. I once almost killed my little sister. It was only the timely intervention of an adult which saved me from putting the

Kitchen meat-knife, an instrument of surgical sharpness, through her throat because she had once more stolen my teddy bear. School was fraught with fights. Teenage saw me, an intelligent girl who could pass exams easily, wandering the streets of the city with a knife and a gang of acolytes looking for trouble. I am told that when I was a baby I screamed almost all my waking hours, but my Mother's supplies and then the taste of feeding bottles. I was always lonely in spite of everything. I was a weird child and my violence was not fired in a soup of Freudian deprivation or parental error. And they had wanted a girl.

I have always been abnormally strong, able to win fights with boys and later able to beat any man at Indian wrestling. All I had to do to win was to unleash in myself my ungovernable rage and direct it into my art. The sheer fact of existence fills me with fury, it is as if I was born full of resentment and rage at being in this world. I should have been born somewhere else connected to my talents, which in spite of the flowering of my intellectuality, resulting in being recognised as unusually clever, does not make me feel at home on Earth. My destiny is not fulfilled. I have never felt that.

So I am going to alter this state of affairs. Earth is where I am and will be, and I am fully tired of losing friends with my evil moods. Many things have already been tried of course, I have been to psychiatrists and neurosurgeons ever since I was little. My parents refused to allow me to have brain surgery because they feared the crude methods might turn me into a vegetable. They were correct, but the answer still lies in brain surgery. That is why I have devoted recent years to learning everything necessary about manipulation of the human brain. I am an artist, as is well-known, but painting ceased to give me satisfaction as did figurative sculpture. I have worked in performance art, and this new project is very much a result of those years spent doing quite extraordinary things in front of people in art galleries. Now, I intend to solve the central problem of my own life. Rather than trust myself to a brain surgeon, I myself will effect the radical change in temperament needed to make my life peaceful, without altering in any way my intelligence, perception of the world or motor functions. More than one piece of autosurgery has been successfully carried out, although some have unfortunately been obliged to call for medical help due to exhaustion. The operation will be painless and I do not anticipate fatigue. There will be no problems with anaesthesia, success will be with skill and delicacy.

Having located my own amygdala, which is the seat of the disturbance, I shall implant permanent pathways to that and to nearby areas so that I can self-administer appropriate chemicals to the exact brain areas needed whenever I feel slightly irritated, which is often the prelude to fits of rage. I shall never again be out of self control.

I hope that this process will become recognised as a valid tool to people similarly afflicted, to violent souls of all kinds who wield terror over others, to anyone who destroys the peace of the world by unleashing the powers of darkness which reside deep within their natures, whether there by natural accident or unfortunate disturbance. I intend to benefit people instead of being remembered as one who turned her



own and other's lives because she could not keep her temper.

Everything is prepared (see notes on procedure).
I have no fear.

She had several chemicals prepared in readiness. No one substance was a panacea. It would require experience to know which to introduce at any one time: there was the monthly cycle, occasional illness and medications to be taken into account. Deep in the hypochlorite, many chemicals have many effects. Any interference must be as precise as possible, unlike the offerings of the chemotherapists she had encountered over the years. She had steroids, hormones, corticosteroid, corticotrophin, adrenocorticotrophin, delti-1 form, tetrahydrocortisol, naphthopirone, naphthopirone, polioxin, and her own invention, her own serotonin, created. It had hitherto been thought that serotonin was not after all a useful psychotherapeutic tool, but she had not been convinced from her reading. She had extracted her own serotonin and distorted its molecule structure to resemble that of tyrosine acid derivatives. The scar on her belly showed where she had opened herself to take the necessary samples from the bowel lining, and with the help of a biochemist, a dear friend who had no idea what she was actually engaged in, had remarked this precisely and could produce it in the lab next door, which had once been a kitchen.

The only advantage of possibly getting someone else to do what she required was that a qualified brain surgeon would not be as excited as she was during actual operation. She could not be too tranquillised. Her advantage was that strength of character goes hand in hand, paradoxically, with a wild temper. Her

rage could tear the world apart, and she was making a construct a new world.

Everything would be okay, and an optimal deep within that part of her which she now probed with a fine-tuned, sterile wire.

I realised, it seemed, and all the world was made. The mud smelled of death and effluents, of petrol and shit and lead. She wore dark green Wellington boots and a noumenal hat, and in between, nothing. What could logic do in such a world, you would get wet eventually anyway. Trudging after her mother in the snow it had been like this, the boots sticking in the green slime and clay beneath the perfect whiteness. Not far to go now, lovely, soon be at school, put your feet where I put mine or you may fall into a bog, this field is full of bogs under the snow. Out there though, in the countryside the snow was never blotched by specks of soot. Lifting high the infant legs, in the end the warmth of the schoolhouse full of enemies, now to be faced, her mother gone to work leaving her small and precious intelligent very bad-tempered girl in the hands of apocryphal teachers and children who would laugh at the fur-lined hood her mother had sewed and call her Eskimo Nell!

On and on now through the terrible humours of this planet where the weather was never good, was always dull and wet and cold and watched oh to be in England, now November's here! Everything looks like a sea of diarrhoea, even earthworms could not thrive in this cold stuff, and they will survive almost anything. Floating daffodils, she had often marvelled at the lively worms turning in their groves, independent at being disturbed to make way for a bulb which would also survive the ghastly winter and thrust forth beauty and laughter enough to delight a crowd of Wordsworths whose hearts would lift at the sight of these glorious sex-organs.

But now it was serious, and she was alone, no Mother to guide and cheer and it didn't look much like anything at all had been planned. But as in fairytales and horror stories, there was a light on the horizon. Was it a house, a palace, or a Will-o-the-Wisp come to lure her to her death in the bubbling moccas beneath the outer shell of the planet? There was only one way to find out. A wind whipped up full of gall and rebelling the rain of sulphur from far hills far to set a frozen mammoth. But this was important work, her legs must carry her — towards the lights. It seemed to take an age, the knees weakening, the fingers long since dropped off with cold for all she knew and hunger and thirst driving her mad to the point where she thought perhaps like Scarlett she might go with the wind and out the very earth. Rhett and Ashley were nowhere to be seen when real trouble was brewing. Her senses were not deprived, therefore she need not have been looking toward so much, deep into the sea of associations, not always as free as some literary critics will have it, but the outer world was so bloody awful there was nothing for it but to be cowardly as well as go on, like Midgemon, to Christmas backwards, or the light. It would have been perfectly possible to forget what world she was out to change so awful was the world she was in, but deep in her mind it was there, the ideal, the idea, the at, the drive onwards to the light and salvation.

Her sight was in an office block in a city park with no cars, but the door opened as she approached it much as doors in hilleries open to those in fairytales or those with heavy shopping bags in departmental stores. A secretary in a nylon overall waited.

"Do you have an appointment?" That phrase, how many desperate supplicants has it put off forever, how many at the end of their tether have simply stepped backwards and knotted the tether into a noose for their own necks?

"Yes," she lied.

"Well if you will go into the waiting-room I'll ask the chief to see you in a moment." On the waiting-room wall the posters: A skull smoking a cigarette, a reminder to have her cervix checked, a warning about toxemia (but who eats doughnut anyway?), a holiday poster for spectacular trips across the Coast Central Commune, complete with arranged simulated brain damage so that presumably one would not be able to read any more boring posters. The magazines on the table: *Country Life*, *Vogue*, *Punch*. Instructions how to go walking in the country dressed in a side-slit scarlet dress with high sequenced shoes, feathers in the hair, and punch somebody, possibly an unsmiling Pig.

And then the cross of Jesus on a handout, advertising Western Meditation which would change the world, person by person, education was the key to eliminating all warfare. Jesus with his cotens of thugs around him, instructing them how to spread the message so that all future generations would be able to torture and maim and kill in his name. The only one among them with any wit or foresight, Jesus. And his girlfriend Mary of ill repute turned from a healthy woman into a lost fetishist. If he comes again, it will be different. She herself would personally attend to him. She Mary Amysdale would personally duff him up for all his pain and trouble and misery.

"The Chief will see you now," said the secretary who had glided in on the thick pile carpet. With no word she followed, dripping evil-smelling mud, and then stood there in front of the vast and dignified desk covered in the hide of an unfortunate animal. She found a pair of gleaming spectacles which did not quite hide perverted intelligence shooting forth like stungays at her disreputable appearance.

Have a seat. She resisted easily the temptation to pick up the seat and bash him with it, sat on it, squelching her bum, and the interview began. She gathered together her confidence.

"I understand that you are applying for a passport, and a license for agriculture?"

"You understand correctly." There would be no point in revealing negative emotion if it would get her nowhere, but the sight of that face was ranking somewhere built up from underneath making a significant sewer in weak conduits. The fury of sight was in her, in front of her its cause. All in one package, a manifestation of what fucked up the world.

A white, clean, bespectacled masculine, self-assured, unscrupulous, self-controlled, reasonable, rational, patronising, helpful, fatherly, brotherly, friendly, efficient, treated, qualified, educated, powerful, patient, virile, married, God-fearing, authoritative, secure, polite and democratic male. He must be democratic or



she would not be here at all.

"Well, let's begin at the beginning," he said, relaxing visibly, the tension on his face taking a slightly downward curve. She looked with her telescopic and microscopic eyes and saw his pores open and exude micrograms of sweat containing bacteria, ethyls and esters from whiskey, urea and other shave.

"No, that's too far back. Let's begin now." The whiskers made an arc in space which would have delighted Einstein, but nothing else showed.

"Well, put it to me then in more detail. What do you require of this office?" he was being patient.

"I wish to have free access to the hypothalamic and Amygdalaian territories and after soil-improvement, grow new crops, guaranteed disease-free.

"You must be aware that it will cost you millions, and that there are strict laws governing what is grown here?"

"Yes. But I am prepared to pay a large price, and you would gain in other areas also."

"Would we though? Our ecology is already very carefully balanced."

"I noticed that, outside," she said with sarcasm. And then as he reddened slightly, she told him what she planned to grow: Hybrids of cannabis sativa, peyote, various medicinal plants, and also in underground caverns, with sensory and infra red, antiposting his pointing out that the weather here was too stormy and cold for such crops.

"I see." With glasses like those he should have been able to see but clearly did not, quite.

"And how soon would you wish to commence work?" It was funny how some things commenced and others began.

"I wish to commence immediately."

"I see." There was a nasty sally on the desk,

carried by some hand driven to torture alabaster. She saw it slowly lift itself and slowly work its way through his trinum, shattering stone blood over the room, and this vision warmed her while she waited.

"Well, if you will just return to the waiting-room I shall run a few things through the computer and then we can discuss it further. We cannot promise anything."

"Of course not," she said, knowing that it would always be true. Out in the waiting-room she deliberately chose another chair to mark with an erasor. There was a murmur, she got up and went to check her appearance. The top of her head was open, the scalp laid back like turf, clipped short and next ready to lay down on a prepared surface. There were some shakings out of the gray hairs, a smudge of blood on her forehead. No pockets, no handkerchiefs, so she wiped off the blood with asphalt as best she could. She sat on yet another chair but she was clued out now except for her own humours, deeply steaming out over the grimace of day. She was summoned again.

"Well, I've checked a few facts and figures and there certainly seems no need to terminate the application at this point. It will go before the Board next Thursday and we will let you know of their decision by mail."

"But that's no good. I need to know now. I've got everything ready, it's a matter of life and death."

"My dear lady, it is not a matter of life and death. I'm afraid there is no other way. We have to be democratic about these things, we can't have just any old project going through without a veto and we cannot rush these things." She thought of attempting to take him with poisoned cash, but he had another idea.

"Of course, if you would like to discuss it further here and now," he said in a different tone of voice, looking at her breasts. He turned round to a drinks-tray

behind him, then she gazed up at the alabaster mannequin and let him with it hand. She stormed out past the open-mouthed secretary, determined to go ahead with the project anyway. So, it was illegal? Anarchy was the reply.

Outside it was still raining and there were no other buildings. It is such a moment that anger changes into despair. There had been a lot of anger so there was a lot of despair. Slumping along in her Welles she cried bitter desperate tears. When they got into the schoolyard at playtime the other children gazed upon her, pulling her tangles. Out-numbered she ran to the lows to hide and feared frightful things written behind the door. Outside in the yard, under the shelter, were cages of baby white mice. Everybody got to look at them except her. She wished it would be bedtime so that she could go home. Then the bell rang and she opened her eyes, aware of her sterilized room, the alarm set to go off every ten minutes as an aid in case of unconsciousness. Not inflexible, but it had worked now.

It was wonderful the way nothing hurt at all. In a suppositious corner of her mind she had not quite believed that brain tissue does not itself feel.

She steadied herself and selected a cannula, very gently worked it down into the tissue until the point made contact where an electrode had been. The matter closed around it as if welcoming the foreign object. The cannula was obtained through a biologist, a size used for goats. She had told him that she was doing a lifetime sculpture of a brain operation on a goat, a perfectly possible thing for her to be engaged in. The top was adjustable so that she could have it exactly right, hardly protruding through her skull when replaced. She had not known how thick it would be, but judged correctly that it had been quite thick from the number of knocks it had taken during fights without cracking. Two more cannulae went in a short while. It was now a matter of testing to see if they were correctly placed, although she already felt sure. But she did not want to be the victim of perpetual apparatus or to feel continually hot, or cold or have her judgement and senses distorted in any way. A few millimetres and she might not be able to read, or to smell certain things — but she reminded herself to concentrate now and not digress upon morbid possibilities.

A human brain was like an animal brain precisely, and doubtless human brains were individuals also just like faces and hands. She only knew this one, and it was the best meeting.

Suddenly the weather cleared and she was in a burning desert. A beach, not a desert. There were few people about at this time of day, but no mad dogs. A sailor with his trousers rolled up and his peaked hat away. The Crooks were friendly and good tempered, the men much too friendly but pleasant. Nearby a tethered goat munched on kitchen scraps its golden eyes blink with greed. The sailor came and sat down beside her, joggling her paintbrush, musing the sketch she was making.

"Her steady on, look what you've done!" He looked but obviously could not tell there was anything wrong. He put his arm around her in a strong grip, hugging her bare arm, and put his other hand on her breast which



was clad only in a tiny bikini top. This was so unexpected and unusual, all the Greeks she had met spent a lot of time chatting and being charming. He tried to kiss her.

"Get off you bastard what the hell do you think you're doing?" in any language the message was plain, from both of them. He had no grace, no charm, not a typical Greek but horribly handsome and handsome. She started to struggle but he persisted, muttering the one word "fuck."

"Oh and off you pig," she said, and got her strength together, knocking him off as she stood up, so that he rolled in the sand. Perhaps he was drunk, again unusual for a Greek. He was on his feet again and snarled at her but she got her ankle behind his to bring him down. He was very strong but now she was furious and crushed her fist into his teeth making him howl and bring his hands up. Her other fist went into his eyes and her knee into his balls, bending him double as she sprang back. She grabbed her scratching box and hit him on the back of the head with it, flinging tribes of pain everywhere. He fell groaning, then silent. She spent a lot of time getting back the pain except one which the goat had seen, parked everything and watched the sailor getting to his feet, bending over again to vomit. He gave her a venomous glare and shook his fist but she shook hers with more determination. He staggered off, and she went in search of some lunch. Thank heavens she had her strength, the world was not always safe for women.

She lay back sweating profusely on the sterile sheet. The sun, the effort. The doubt. What would have happened if she had not been able to zap him? It was not possible to think about it, adrenaline into the mouth with revulsion. She remembered now, she had given the rascal skotch to the goat.

So, a little more work and the worst of this project would be finished. She took careful measurements, deciding to loose the babies now, while she was still steady. A hypodermic drill can rip through anything and needs great care. Little jolts about babies in the head filtered through her mind as she finished the job. Then, the electrodes again, the fine probe. Just testing.

She suddenly felt the blissful organic waves passing nature through her, a wonderful feeling of pleasure, but had the presence of mind to switch off the current. It must be like that for desperate drivers, the symptoms of euphoria were so pleasant that she might not wish to surface. Already she was tempted to switch on again. No wonder animals would starve to death rather than stop pressing the buttons. She pressed her own and was instantly flooded with a feeling of happiness, physical sensation so agreeable that it must surely be the way flesh was meant to feel. She switched off, trembling. She took a while to calm down, administered more local anesthetic and a mild tranquilizer and set to work again. Another probe.

Venerous the Lizard Lord stood before her, snarling to show his terrible teeth, his enormous and splendid ruff standing up to impress and intimidate. His claws were terrible and his anger great. She had trespassed into the innermost secrets of the Keep, and she must die.

"So, you call yourself a healer?" he hissed, his

tongue slithering to manage his language. "You come to spy on us from Earth! You will not be the last to have been disposed of here on Anyghelana, oh birds of Death. What say you?"

"Aw shadrup Venerous you amazed newt, I've telegraphed the contents of the scrolls to my colleagues, you might try anything but you can't tapel the project now. We now know that you've been stealing precious metals from the lands of Maruzza and Maquan. We have you, Venerous, what are you going to do?" For answer he extended his claws and lashed out at her, but she was quick and lithe and dodged nimbly. Meanwhile drawing her sword. As she swung it around her head she felt its power flow through her arm like electricity, her shoulders flexed, she took her stance and as the creature darted forward she backed off one front leg with a mighty sweep. A frightful roaring filled the cavern like thunder in the Hippocranal deeps but still he advanced, eyes red with rage, green blood spouting over the precious tapestries which he had plundered from the sewers of Hieshel's Cynus. She thrust with the sword deep into his rumbling breast, reaching all her strength, the strength of conviction, through the sinuous plating and into the beating heart as oval and black as her plans. He who had tried to destroy her world was now dying.

"Earthwoman thou hast done for me," he groaned, blood dripping out of his mouth. But tell me this. How will you now return to Earth. My rumors have destroyed your ship. Did you think we were complete fools?" She sprang back, pulling out the sword which smoked with his acid burners, and ran for the door, down the thousand steps of his tower and out into the perpetual twilight of Anyghelana. The grey plain stretched before her, the only relief her wrecked ship. She thrust her sword into its scabbard and put up her



Benefits of simulation

^aCh. Board of Medical Directors: how will you help
your patient?

The thing is, she thought loudly, clashing her instruments with alcohol, I need the right to get me out of scraps, but would I get into the scraps on the first place if it wasn't for the angst? There were always outside circumstances which would excite anyone to me and wrath. But those who were mild and turned the other cheek, did they get repaid, beat up, slaughtered? Well, of course they did.

She placed a drop of cannabidiol down the central cannula. Instantly, thoughts going on several levels, delight and distortion and mystery and humour. Great fun. And not a bit of agony anywhere. When it was over she lay dreamily smiling thinking, well, it works just fine. Amazing. But she was lazy, she just wanted to be there, existing, taking pleasure in being around. She took a look in the mirror at the exposed brain and found it hilarious. She laughed and giggled, feeling the lovely humour rise up from her diaphragm in waves, the funniest brain she had ever seen. A person could live like this, just laughing at their own brain. There was a loud knocking on the door of her apartment. Instant alert. Who was it. Go away. Keeping quiet, wishing them away. Eventually it stopped, they had assumed she was out, had not heard her laughing, she thought.

Last stage of the operation, placing the skull with its holes over the ducts, perfect fit. Then the scalp, stitches. Antiseptic. Sheet of penicillin, adjustment of drip feed to include high ascorbic acid, take that out soon. Her brain cleared of the last molecular of carnal bond and she felt fine. If it wasn't for the oxygen cylinder she would have liked a smoke. The console ducts were obvious but she would wear a hat until her hair grew again. Resting she worked until she felt quite certain she would not feel ill upon getting up and slowly set up. When the dizziness had gone she began putting things in order, had a whiff of oxygen and went to make a cup of ginger tea. She washed her face. Everything was fine. She hoped that the films were good. About three days consciousness, probably, taking it easy. Quiet, and sleep. And then there would be the matter of obtaining horticultural supplies, good manure, and fresh seeds. And a clean water supply down there in the caves. Whole troops of *Amegillidius* were wintered, she would make them blossom. The alarm bell rang so she went to disconnect it. These was the important matter of getting Venger's mittens on her side to assist with repairing her ship. She would be their leader now. Vengers was dead. The phone rang as soon as she placed it on

"Hello Nadine, your phone's been out of order. I've been looking for you for days."

"Hello, who is that, this is Mary Arnygdala speaking."

"Nadine, quit joking, there's a party tonight in Elise's studio, can you come?"

"You've got the wrong number, this is Mary Arrys," she yelped, dropping the phone. "Jesus!" She slammed the phone so hard that the plastic cracked and she poked it up and crashed it against the wall, knocking a potted cat's bowl off a shelf. She was about to start screaming when she remembered Maxwell. The console. She

slipped a small dose of heroin, special sessions and was instantly on a different frame of mind. She must have been suffering from post-operative shock. She climbed up the stairs but felt slightly weak so went to sit by the window, pulling the cord on the blinds. The view outside was of a dismal November afternoon, with rain and gusts of wind blowing garbage around. It was enough to depress the spirits, but she wasn't going to get upset, perhaps the weather would improve by the time she had finished her convalescence. The afternoon mail arrived and she noticed that there had been other mail. She opened the most ominous one, which was diagnosed as an electricity bill, but she could decipher the strange script. It was a declaration from the members of Veterans of their fervent anger, and a refusal under any circumstances to bid a bee.

She went to sit by the window once more. Tears ran down her face. Not tears of anger, but the tears of the mind and intellect. Only rarely as a child had she ever felt like this. Perhaps she would never be able to return to earth. Perhaps they would stop her crop-growing scheme! If she went out perhaps she would be attacked by kiths? There must be ways of dealing with situations without force but they were alien to her. Surely though, she had taken the right course? One thing was certain: nothing in her world would ever be the same again.

Josephine Saxton's first story "The Wolf" appeared in 1903, a time when she has published regularly (and prolifically, on both sides of the Atlantic). She is the author of four novels, the most recent being *The Travels of Jane Saint* (1999), all of which defy easy categorization.

Continued from page 2

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Interviews with news community with new aims. We could see better educated on the most more-blended careers of journalism in the very end of that it would be about as affected as trying to stop dinosaurs with a protractor. We would connect with our precious space to explore and celebrate the paradoxical of what is dangerous and worthwhile as investigative fiction to promote an open and varied forum for writers rather than a disconnected market. Already we have inspired some human and talented residents some of them previously prominent in New Weekly News, among are now beginning to happen writers who we hope will go on to figure their mark on the world. It is gradual organic process. After three years the magazine is for times (filling all our hopes for it but two are happy with the way it is developing). We hope our readers—even those as impatient and impatient as the combine of their own history in Montreal (Macdonald and Charles (Pit) — with their with us and every and can contribute to that development. Even New Weekly is not without its own.

Abstract

CHEEK TO CHEEK

Nicholas Allan

I remember, before finally living together, we arranged to stay in a mutual friend's flat, and it was there we first undressed together, and it was there I first inspected stroked and eventually melted into the full extent of Camilla's white body, and it was there I first witnessed the curious excrescences or fleshy wings of equally white skin which descended an inch or so from the shy lips of her vagina. They were not offensive; they were even charming, cute – sensual (as well as sensitive), and in the course of our love-making I would kiss or tease them in much the same way as I might kiss or tease her ears or nipples. It was during one of these afternoons (after particularly strenuous and altogether satisfying passion) that she lay her damp ash blonde head in the crook of my arm and explained that these extensions of her genitalia – which, as it exemplified her remark, were at that point illuminated by a slant of gold sunlight from the window, had made their appearance only after we had met.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"I don't know," she whispered.

I suspected, at the time, that it was as if her body itself had a message for me: this was her gentle and oblique way of saying that she accepted me, perhaps was even very fond of me. And it must have been about a week later that I discovered, in the bath one morning, that a misperception had occurred – not only in my feelings towards her, but in a definite thickening and even extension of my own foreskin. It was as though a layer of subcutaneous fat, similar to that found at the base of the thumb, had developed about my penis. This, of course, immediately revealed to Camilla. Yet neither of us felt cause for alarm: in fact we were quite comforted, since these physical anomalies considerably increased the sweetness of

our love-making. I would go as far as to say, it served to bring us together, though how much closer together it was eventually to bring us I could not then have guessed – or, for that matter, wanted to have guessed.

I remember distinctly, after one of the secret appointments at our mutual friend's flat, we found ourselves still unrelieved, still sexually ungratified. Although I personally feared the consequences of living together, I felt as did Camilla, that our young, expansive, innocent bodies required more frequent union than the kindness of our mutual friend allowed. It was decided we should rent a flat, and before long we found one which was very small, cheap, and badly furnished. The first few days in our new home – I recollect, were spent hedonistically, yet without the least guilt or reckless copulation on chairs, on the cooker, the bathroom scales, against the wall, on the front-door mat, under the television set, in the bath, on the lavatory, between the kitchen table and the dining board, and once or twice in the bed. We scrooled manically, howled like cows, with an old Fred Astaire record we'd discovered under the sofa, presumably left by the last tenant – we experimented freely with rhythm. And so we managed to perform the kind of manoeuvres impossible in our parents' houses, none we'd only read or talked or dreamt about before.

The pleasure (incredible now) of seeing Camilla step wholly naked into the kitchen or wander nonchalantly across the front room there was memorable. The very idea of massaging her breasts while she endeavoured to make the tea or flush the lavatory sent me into ecstatic raptures. For hours on end we would sit or lie on the carpet in the front-room, half-replete

touching one another, examining languorously the ample folds, taut hairs, and smooth surfaces of our pale skins, and forever finding the peculiar enlargements of our respective sexual organs. It was during one of those moments that we noticed – could not help but notice – that a substantial growth of both had taken place.

"Does it worry you?" Camille asked, with genuine concern.

"Not at all," I said.

As we huddled together on the blue carpet, silent content, thankful, my lips brushing her blonde locks, Camille beginning to draw a tune called "A Foggy Day," we'd recently heard on the newest record-player I had a hunch, yet positively distinct inclination to ask her to marry me, though fortunately (if say fortunately from a retrospective point of view), I possessed the prudence of mind not to.

I think it must have been on the third morning of our living in the flat that I decided, in that semi-hazed state between waking and sleeping, that perhaps we should take a walk outside, go shopping and inspect our new neighbourhood. On attempting to get out of bed, however, I found I was unable to pull myself away from the soft sleeping Camille. My testicles seemed somehow attached to her. She stirred. I assumed that my morning erection (due mostly to a full bladder) had by chance lodged itself between her legs, and this I found rather touching. On delicate inspection and carefully applied leverage, however, I discovered this not to be the case. It seemed I was definitely stuck.

"Camille," I began.

Camille was smiling, which, surprisingly, slightly irritated me. Her blue eyes watched me in what I can only call a demanding way.

"Look, could you raise your left leg a little?" I said.

She giggled.

"I want to go for a pee."

Camille continued to gaze at me, without moving.

"Why don't you – go inside me?" she said playfully.

Still only half-awake, the suggestion appeared strikingly erotic – it was something we'd never tried before – and so, after a little hesitation, I emptied the entire contents of my bladder into her, and Camille, recovering, it seemed rather machinelike throughout. Curiously, perhaps astonishingly, there was no leakage, and no yellow stain on the sheets. Without withdrawing, however, we made love as usual on waking, and I suppose it was only after this that we finally became aware of our true predicament. Experiencing a slightly unpleasant sensation when attempting to part – as though our pubic hairs had become entangled – we both gazed down between our legs and discovered that the pale folds of skin emanating from Camille's vagina had merged inseparably with my own far thicker. Our sexual organs miraculously had fused together overnight.

At first we were frightened. Camille yelped.

"Look, we'd best not make any sudden movements, I suggested.

We lay still, Camille lowering her head to my chest. After vague and aimless experimentation – touching, pulling, relaxing and tensing of various muscles – we lay staring at one other's arms. Then Camille

began to giggle again. I don't know why, but I felt embarrassed, and, although aware that our position might be thought by some as absurd, I did not feel like laughing.

Perhaps we imagined that further sleep might resolve our problem and since we were still tired from the industrious night before, by tacit agreement we struggled up to each other and fell into a light and curiously untroubled doze. The positions of our sexual organs left an unexpected intimacy to our sleep. Little surges of innocent, benign love for Camille, like sweeps of amber sand, seemed to pass right the way through my body. Her hot breath against my cheek, her child-like hands carelessly wrapped about my shoulders allowed me to experience a kind of bliss therein I felt since we'd met.

We woke as late as one o'clock in the afternoon, both suffering from slight headaches. Our first reaction on opening our eyes was one of relief, since we found ourselves several feet away from one another in the large double bed. Yet, as it felt we were still apparently connected, I pulled away the bed clothes, glanced down and saw between us, long snake-like on the sheet, a long, quite thin extension – like an umbilical cord – running from as well as forming part of, the lozenge of my penis to the mouth of Camille's vagina, which at enclosed in the form of a loose funnel where the enlarged legs came were. The cord itself was four or five feet long, about as thick as a finger. The skin moist and translucent, blue veins showing beneath, was laced with large pores, from which exuded, even at that moment a faint smell of sexual activity.

We were dumbfounded. I think, terrified. With extreme caution, we stepped out of bed on either side, so that the cord dangled like a slippery rope across the bed between us. We were too repelled to say anything for a while.

It's enough to make me shud tears to think how much I happened to love Camille over this particularly intimate period. Much reason to be astonished at wanting to be rid of her. But five days after our discovery, as I was vaguely watching the television and Camille eating and humming a hole in a pair of her joints for our over-growing cord (opening the flies was unsatisfactory since the zip scratched the skin), my thoughts delved towards a separation. And the means to achieve it.

This was troubling. Camille was, technically and emotionally, my first real girlfriend. The last days of the summer term, after exams, I remember, when Camille and I got together, seemed the beginning of a substantial or at least romantic future. I know that when I saw her cross the college playing-field in her dark blue school uniform, her curly blonde hair bobbing, I had wanted her, and that feeling of wanting her had not abated until this moment.

That we should seek a doctor's professional opinion was Camille's immediate, bright-inspired suggestion, but we didn't have a telephone. Besides, I didn't want our parents knowing, which they might if our doctors caught wind of the situation.

"Most likely it'll just shed itself, like a snake's skin," I said authoritatively, though secretly doubtful.

The cord lengthened about a foot a day, and thick-

used proportionately. It dragged behind us with a rustling sound (like a hose-pipe across grass) as we walked from room to room, and on occasion I noticed it had grown distinctly heavier. Sleep's surprising and thoroughly beneficial discovery swiftly transformed our fear into relief, into sheer gratitude. Whenever we took the on-again of sexual desire, the cord marginally constricted into itself (while becoming engorged with blood) until we were, in effect, tugged together, urging us to make love. So Camilla might be in the kitchen boiling potatoes and I in the front-room combing my hair — I had woken, purred all the doors — and instantly we would be made aware of one another's desire. It would make us laugh.

Due to our connection, our awareness of one another reached hyper-sensitive proportions. Thrills, doubts, love, and displeasure were telegraphed from one to the other by the cord. I could not hate my craving for Camilla: she could not hate her affection for me.

After breakfast, we would take exercise holding the cord between us, running round the front-room and up and down the hall — endless lapses at several. Often, before lunch, I would sit in an armchair, with my eyes closed meditatively, the raw flesh of healthy exhaustion on my face, twiddling the cord with my fingers (while it lay neatly coiled on the carpet) and listen, listen to the hum of cutlery, the effortless footfall on the kitchen floor, or else wait for the fluttering orange shadow of Camilla to pass across my eyelids. But all the while I was aware that it was a kind of bliss I had picked all along of being experienced.

For, gradually, our domestic contentment was disturbed, inevitably, I suppose, by the matrix of its original promotion. Along the cord ran the occasional dark throbs or brooding pulsation of disquiet. Our flashes of sexual desire were not always smooth-sailed, causing embarrassment for one, irritation for the other. The odours of semen, urine and vaginal excitement trapped in the cord and exsanguinating (like sweat) from its pores had urged us to haste frequently, but recently we'd agreed that perhaps the smell was the lesser inconvenience. And Camilla took to dressing (become indignant that her lithe body was not perpetually on show) though admittedly our blades, so effervescent in the beginning, had just lately flourished.

I took to gazing out of the window. It had been raining on and off for the last three days, yet I began to envy the few unbridled pedestrians who walked the street below. For the size of the flat seemed to diminish daily, neither of us could ever be alone. I became reticent at the staggering barenesses of the interior design: a pea-green sofa challenged a canary yellow fire-place, a rose-terracotta-topped dining-table reflected the complex tulip patterns of the just-faded wallpaper. The cord only permitted limited movement — never hasty — from any kitchen to living-room, lavatory to hall. A thoughtless action could cause exquisite pain.

Yet with the cord's length at twenty-one feet (we measured it daily) to leave the flat was undesirable. Ideas of stuffing the cord down one's trouser-leg and up Camilla's skirt were thought-forfeited, and in practice were, of course, found to be impossible. Fortunately, we were on the sole and Camilla anticipating our wild, marathon "Bionnemon" festival several

weeks, had stored sufficient food. We were on to the powdered milk and saccharin tablets.

Since our relationship had never been founded on conversation, I resorted to watching television. Camilla was singing while she sewed. One of the songs from the scratched Fred Astaire record:

Heaven, I'm in heaven
And my heart beats so fast
I can hardly speak,
And I seem to find the happiness
I seek
When we're out together —

"Must you sing that?" I asked.

Camilla made some vague nod. I thought, particularly except to remark about it being "a free world."

"I'm trying to watch the adverts."

She didn't stop, and continued to sing at the point she was preparing with a small pair of scissors. I believe she was quite upset and thus unexpectedly hurt me. Perhaps she sensed this — the cord might have given it away — because she looked up, reproach in her eyes. She stopped singing, but I felt uneasy.

We sat through an entire football match although neither of us had any interest in the sport. I made comments like "He's scored a goal!" or "That's a penalty, isn't it?" but she offered no reply. Instead, finishing the jeans and trying them on — slipping the cord down a slit at the top of the jeans to the prepared hole, and closing the slit with a press stud — she paced the room.

"Will you do my jeans now?" I asked, pleasantly enough.

For a moment she was silent. She picked up the sewing box, looked at me thoughtfully, as though considering a variety of possibilities, then suddenly lobbed it at my head, the contents — scissors, needles, thread, and safety-pins — flying across the sofa. Then she left the room and would — I am sure — have slammed the door.

I waited. After a while I thought I heard her sobbing on the hall but I felt no inclination to mollify her or even move. I was shaken and upset. This represented I suppose an dramatic terror, the first admission or outcry of our growing dissatisfaction. It struck me with a power which shocked, that dear Camilla, of the blonde hair and alabaster thighs, had shown in this action a facet of her personality I'd never caught in her before — certainly one that she'd never shown. Tomorrow communicated itself through the pale, weeping cord.

My eyes, all the while, had been attracted to the silver scissors lying unlocked on the blue carpet, and slowly, with what I imagined to be a criminal's wary eye and detachment, I picked them up, marked their sharpness and looking unaccountably clever, slipped them into my shirt pocket, with no precise scheme in mind.

That night, as usual, we slept naked. By carefully folding my shirt I brought the pocket containing the scissors face upwards, and lay the shirt on the bedside table within easy reach. Through the patter of rainfall offered to soothe my mind, the darkness of the room induced me to ponder fruitfully over the past few days.

Camilla slept fitfully after disturbed dreams. I thought, were perhaps a premonition of my vague intentions, unsettled by the gently pulsating cord. I knew I had to be careful since the cord functioned as a sophisticated begging-device, yet, because I regulated her emotional variations too, I shared in effect, the same warning system.

Her every skin appeared to glow in the same blackness. I leant close to her face. The furrowed lips, straight and irregular nose, and strange leaf-shaped eyes I had once catalogued (to myself, and to her) as being shaped by an intelligence, a particular intelligence, they seemed so shrewdly constructed. They still did, but it now seemed that perhaps the genius was a little wasted. The inability to gouge or even imagine the depth behind the face showed either the lack of my own understanding or demonstrated Camilla's limitations. I grew steadily more contemptuous of her as the night progressed.

At about one o'clock I took out the scissors. My thoughts had darkened, contradicted themselves, confused me. Suddenly had a desire to run down the wet street below our bedroom window, yapping wildly, or else visit a friend and talk to him all night. Frustration gripped me. I thought the cord might twitch. Camilla uttered something. I lay still, restless and angry, noting the silent movement of the scissors. Then, as if about to slash my own wrists, I gradually pulled the bodiless away revealing to my nervous touch the S-shaped length of the cord. Estimating the centre, I placed and was immediately aware of the cold scissor blades against the cord skin.

I closed the scissors sharply and firmly, and at about the same time, possibly before, I cried out involuntarily. Camilla followed closely with a terrifying shriek, which I thought excessive, until I too felt the pain. Dark blood trickled against my thigh, and began to make the sheets sticky. Camilla was screaming at me. Each time we moved the path in the cord (which I'd failed to sever) widened, we were both quite sick with pain.

Then I heard what Camilla was saying. "Turn on the light! Turn on the bloody light!"

I did so. Snagging the scissors I could only stare at the mess I'd made: the blood, flowing with skindown exaggerated the wound. Camilla was bawling herself with anger.

"Do we have any Elastoplast?" I asked stupidly. I don't know why. Camilla started crying, after which she mumbled miserably and miserably into the pillow.

"Perhaps we ought to clean the wound or something," I whispered hopefully.

But no, she wanted only to talk to the pillow, about how it was, not she, who wanted us to live together, and how it was I, not she, who had wanted us to keep the cord rather than call the doctor (I could have sworn it was a mutual decision). Then, caught up in sentimental, embittered nostalgia (while I tenderly yet uselessly unknotted the cord with the sheets), she spoke warmly, now with vague coherence, about "those last weeks of the summer term", "that kiss in the empty class-room" (I had never kissed her in an empty class-room) "our friends, Andrew and Richard" (her

friends, Andrew and Richard) "sitting in the park" (hardly smiling), "that afternoon in the Carlton cinema", "that evening at the King and Queen". "The last day of school" (when, in a shaded part of the quadrangle we had realised we definitely wanted one another - perhaps inspired by the alternatives of an unromantic parting). "What was the bloody point of all this?" (My hands, by then, soaked in blood). "What was the point of all that?" (More asked).

She continued to weep, her face pressed against my shoulder. I wanted to tell her to stop, but didn't dare. I felt rather fearful myself, I even began to reproach myself for I must admit, as a declaration of her fondness for me she had never been quite so explicit.

Eventually I managed to get her out of bed and we carried the damaged cord, like a lame pigeon, to the bedroom, where I cleaned the wound and applied a bandage. Suffering exactly the same pain we were able to find a strange empathy for one another and thus allowed us to fall into a dispositive intimacy.

Opening the windows and the curtains of the living room, so that rain fell heavily on to the carpet, we put on the Fred Astaire record - I knew all the lyrics by then - and settled on the sofa in the darkness, as though meeting illicitly as in the past, Camilla's head resting on my shoulder, and the newly bandaged cord lying warmly between us.

I cannot say definitely that when we finally fell asleep we lay in each others' arms, but, in a romantic way, I always like to think we did. I know, at least, I was as at peace in my unexpectedly pregnant dreams (dreams inspired by Camilla's verbal trade) that I was curiously unconscious, even faintly apathetic at being awoken not only by the silver morning sun light but also by an unaccustomed sound: the sound of the front door being softly closed. I then gazed with a wistful, half-closed eye at the cord and saw it had turned a grey-blue colour, as if bruised all over and drained of blood. I followed its length, passed the bandaged wound, until, curled harmlessly on the sofa beside me, I came to its flaking, shrivelled end. It was as if anticipating our union, darker feelings, the cord had had the decency to die quietly, without death rattle or convulsions, simply to spare us from the hurt we would otherwise have felt.

I thought then (as I have often in my strange thought since) that had it not been for the physical evidence of the dry, gossamer remains of the cord - which I slowly, gently torn from my penis, and coiled up like a rope, eventually to flush down the lavatory - it would be almost impossible to conceive that I had ever really been intimately involved with Camilla at all.

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SAVING THE UNIVERSE

DAVID GARNETT

“**S**orry. Dan said, as he pushed his way into the solid mass of people packing the bar and accidentally knocked an elbow, which resulted in the owner of the elbow, spilling a fraction of his drink.

“Don’t worry about it,” said the American whose drink it had been.

Dan wasn’t worried.

“That’s the first time anyone’s spoken to me since I got here,” the American continued.

“Yeah?”

I was beginning to think I was invisible or something.

Dan looked round, glancing from side to side. “Who said that?”

The American frowned, not understanding.

Dan pushed further towards the bar, but found himself still next to the overweight youngster. Out of habit, he glanced surreptitiously at the kid’s name tag. Bruce Newcome. At the same time Newcome was glancing at Dan’s name label, but he showed no trace of recognition.

Finally getting one shoulder wedged up against the bar, Dan looked around at the others crowding the area, then gazed beyond and into the large hotel lounge searching for someone he knew. Anyone he knew. There were so many people there, but not a familiar face in sight.

“I’ve just got here too,” said Dan at last. The bar was the logical place to begin a science fiction convention, although the official opening had been yesterday, and it was here that he would spend most of his time.

“I’ve been here two days,” answered Newcome, as he continued gazing expectantly at Dan.

Two days without speaking to anyone. Dan couldn’t bear his own first convention, when it had taken half a day before he met anyone to talk to. “Your first con?” he asked. There was nothing else to do while waiting to be served, although it was bad policy to take his eye off the one person who was trying – or

pretending to try – to serve eight or two people, all of whom were ordering seven or eight drinks.

“No. I’ve been to twenty-seven back home. This is my first British con.”

Twenty-seven. Four and, and he only looked about eighteen. He must really be hooked, thought Dan. He nodded his head, because it was easier than speaking. The sooner his vocal chords were lubricated the better. He wished the Yank would push off. Dan didn’t want to waste time talking with him, that wasn’t what he came to consider.

Often he wondered what he did come for.

“Look,” he said. “I’m dying for a drink. Now?” He strode across, getting his second shoulder to the bar and then shuffling from side to side until there was room for his arm as well, with the attached hand clatching a cheap new liver.

“Put of Purring’s, please,” he said four times over the next five minutes, until the barman condescended to serve him.

“Ta,” said Dan, taking the pint and the handful of coins which composed the change. He slipped the money into his pocket. “This is probably the most intimate thing at the convention,” he said as he turned to face his young fat friend. “Beer at next year’s price?”

But the American had gone, and Dan was by himself. He hated drinking alone.

After that first drink and wandering around the public rooms of the hotel for a few minutes, still not seeing anyone he wanted to meet, Dan came across the second bar. This was much smaller than the main bar, and also had a direct entrance from the street outside which made it more like a pub – not many hotel residents used it.

He pushed the swing doors open and went inside, walking towards the bar. As he did, he became aware that everyone was turning to look at him. It wasn’t unusual for the regulars of any pub to turn their heads

towards the entrance whenever the door opened, to see who was coming in. But this wasn't like that. They weren't giving him a single quick glance, then turning on with what they had been doing. Instead, conversations died, cigarettes paused on their way to mouths, glasses stayed frozen at lips.

Trying to ignore all this attention, Dan focused on the impressive rise of hand pumps at the bar. He looked at the barman, who was also staring at him. There was something odd here — and everyone else seemed to think that it was Dan.

"A pint of best, please!" As the barman reached for a glass and started to fill it, Dan sensed the others in the pub slowly come to life and continue where they had left off.

"Thanks," he said, handing the man a five and reaching for his glass — a pint, he was surprised to see, a real pint, not one of those metric measures.

But before he had his hand on it, the barman pulled the glass back an inch or so. "Hees," he said, looking at the money Dan had given him, "what's this? None of your foreign money, guv?" He held the note up to the light. A gasp!

Dan looked over his shoulder, at the men in their dark clothes, with their flat caps and thick mustaches. They were all men, no women, all of them living ghosts from — when would it be? Probably the first decade of the century. The interior of the place wouldn't have changed much since those days, only here there was no cigarette machine, no juke box, no fruit machines, no video games, and almost certainly no live sex show on Friday and Saturday evenings.

"How much do you want?" Dan asked.

"Three ha'penny," said the barman, putting down the five and pushing it towards Dan, as though it was something particularly disgusting that he wished he hadn't touched.

That was going to be difficult. There was no such thing as a penny any more, let alone a half-penny. Dan dug his hand into his pocket and brought out a selection of pounds, fifty, twenties and ten pences. He laid them on the bar.

"Penny ha'penny," he said. "A wonderful invention, you know, inflation. Look, I've just arrived and this is all the money I have. Can't you take some? It's worth far more than the price of a pint."

"This is a pub, guv," said the barman, "not a bank."

"How about putting it on the slate? I'll pay next time I'm here." Seventy or eighty pence.

In answer, the barman pointed to the sign above the Guinness mirror which proclaimed No Creds! — This Means You.

Dan could have walked out of the door, there was no need to stay, but he refused to be beaten. He wanted to try the same sort of beer that his great grandfather would have drunk.

"Tell you what I'll do," said Dan, collecting all his money. "I'll trade you for that beer, swap it for something. You've already poured it, can't waste it."

"Won't be wasted, I'll drink it myself."

But Dan could tell he'd caught the barman's interest, and also that of the three men who stood at the bar, smoking their rough tobaccos and taking in their flaky voices. He had become the centre of their attention.

"I'll give you my watch."

"Ha!" laughed the man next to Dan. "Bust, is it? A

watch for a job of ole' ha'?"

"No, it works fine. Look." Dan held out his arm, showing them all his wristwatch.

"That's a watch?" said one of the other men at the bar.

"Yeah, course. It's a quartz crystal digital watch. Not seen one before?"

"This is a watch," said the second man, pulling out his watch on its length of silver chain from the left pocket of his waistcoat.

They were all staring at Dan's outstretched wrist as he said, "You tell the time from these numbers here. Also the day and the date. And the year, of course."

"Of course," said the barman, winking to the other three customers at the bar and smiling shyly.

Dan also smiled. He pointed to the face of the watch. "What does it say?"

"Tuck tuck, tuck tuck," said the first man, to roars of laughter from his friends. "That's what it says."

Dan joined in the laughter. "The numbers," he said. "Read them out."

The barman put his face close to the watch, squinting. "Fifteen," he said slowly, "thirteen, twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four."

"See?" said Dan.

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"That's the time. Fifteen-thirteen. Twenty-four hour clock, you know, which means it's thirteen minutes past three."

The barman nodded his head, slowly, warily, then took out his own watch. He flicked the cover open with his thumb nail, showed the watch face to Dan — half past seven — then put it away again.

"I'm from a different time zone," said Dan.

"That's why it says Saturday instead of Tuesday, I suppose."

"That's it." Dan noticed that the barman was having as much trouble keeping a straight face as he was.

"And why it reads April when really it's

July."

"And this last figure here, see, that's the year I come from."

The barman said nothing, and neither did any of the other men. Dan was wondering whether to add that his watch also turned into a lifeboat when slowly the barman's smile widened. The man shook his head and laughed briefly, sliding the pint towards Dan.

"Your ole's worth a pint, guv, even if your watch ain't," he said. "Have it on the house."

Dan held out the glass to the barman, then to the men by his side. "Cheers." They all raised their drinks to return the toast as Dan took a deep draught. It was awful.

He spent a couple more hours there, allowing his new friends to buy round after round, while he kept them amused with tales of pocket calculators and credit cards, of health food and nuclear submarines of electric razors and plastic cinema, of sex through furs and television quiz shows.

All good things must come to an end, although Dan had never understood why, and finally he stood up and said goodbye. The men at the bar returned his farewell, then watched as the strange chap with the odd clothes and no money got up and went out of the door and back where he came from.

Dan stopped through the swing doors and into the

hotel lobby, letting them stay behind him. Then he turned around and went back inside again.

The smell was different, cannabals now mixed with the tobacco smoke and the aroma of warm beer, and the sound was very different, drowning out almost all conversation – Tex Biko, this month's pubescent rock band, howling out their current number one, "Wanna-fucknaganny" – and most of all the people were different.

The dead were where they should have been, nothing more than fading sepia images in old forgotten photograph albums.

Don was back.

Unemployment, starvation, censorship, inflation, eating, mental law cannabals, depressive rationing, dictatorship.

And there was a waiter.

But none of that would make any difference to the convolutions.

After registering, Don returned to the main bar and sat down to flick through the programme and see what he was going to miss. The same old inevitable names appeared on the panels or as speakers: some of his contemporaries and friends and rivals. Terry Blund and Jeff Rush and Pete Longman. There were even a couple of Americans over, Thomas Whale who was guest of honour, and Alvin Icard.

Don hadn't met either of the Americans, and he had no particular wish to encounter Whale. The man was forever making speeches and writing long articles about how he was retiring from science fiction because he wasn't properly appreciated as the Great Artist he so obviously was – and this after single-handedly trying to dominate the field by writing two dozen shabby novels in as many months. The trouble was that he kept on writing. Worse, he'd won several awards. Perhaps that wasn't too surprising, there were many prizes floating around that anyone who had a few friends to vote for them would eventually pick up one or two.

Laurel had also collected a couple of awards, in spite of the fact that the stories concerned had been exceptionally good. Most of the stuff that was instantly forgettable or totally dull, if not both, or else too long to bother reading. Quantity equalled quality.

Don remembered the old line, it might be bad, but it is science fiction? He smiled and raised his glass to his mouth just as a heavy blow to his left shoulder sent half his pint slopping over the rim and onto the floor.

"Watcha, Krigers. How's it going, mate?"

Jeff Rush stood next to him, grinning, his arms full of books, magazines, papers, scripts. He always seemed to carry a library wherever he went.

"Sorry about that," he added. "I'd buy you another if I wasn't too broke. I'm completely flue, had to send the wife's puggy back to come here." He sat down opposite Don. "Well, how's it going?" he repeated. "I've just sold a six book package to Mace Books. Just crap for money, you understand. You ever met the editor, Karen, like? Had to sweat my bollocks off giving her one organ for every chapter. That's why I only got up to six books, but for five thousand each and six percent what can you expect? Signature next week, then I can buy you a drink."

"What would you like, Jeff?"

"Oh, that's fantastic, Don, you shouldn't make it a

Berry Martini, on the rocks, a double, that's lovely, mate. Fantastic."

Don went and bought the drinks, wondering as he waited which was the greater fantasy – the stories Rush told about his sexual conquests or those of the book deals he had lined up if he spent more time writing than talking about it. He could produce something quite average. He had plenty of imagination – in a limited sort of way – which was exactly what was needed. Readers didn't want anything too way out, something they couldn't understand. Or maybe they did, but they'd never get a chance to read it because that wasn't what editors wanted. They wanted the same old stuff as before, a guaranteed minimum sale something they could insist with a Frank Steele space-ship on the cover. Anything by Thomas Whale, for example.

Almost as soon as Don returned with the drinks, Rush spotted someone else he knew on the other side of the room, and he began picking up his entrance library. "Alfred I've got to go," he said. "I'll see you later, Don. Fantastic to talk to you. Thankstothedrink."

Then he was gone.

Don felt better now. This was what he came to London for, to see his fellow writers and talk shop. It was the only time in the year when he saw any other authors. Stuck in a bare room with only his typewriter for company, he sometimes felt he was all alone in the world. He often got depressed thinking what a crazy way it was to make a living – inventing stories, creating people who had never existed and events which had never happened – and never would. Maybe he'd had less miserable if he was more successful. Like Rush?

He smiled at the idea, watching as Rush escorted a young lady out of the crowded room just as Pete Longman entered. Don raised his arm and moved his wrist approximately fifteen degrees from side to side. Longman came over to him.

"Don, old buddy, just the man I want to see. Can I get you a drink?"

"My favourite phrase from my favourite author. Mine's a pint of rubbish, Pete. Ta."

Longman's first novel had been published in new reviews five years ago. It had been a slow burner, heavy book, with dozens of vice retrospective characters. Don had got halfway through it. Since then Longman had turned out one book a year – each one slower, heavier, with more and more characters. The reviews had got better and better, but Don believed they were killing Longman as an author. He was becoming too specialized, concentrating on one minor segment of a few degrees of the spectrum. Don liked Longman, and he liked his books – books which seemed so out of character for the otherwise alcoholic who had written them. The books sold very badly, only one had appeared in paperback, and Pete Longman had to supplement his income by cleaning wind-draws.

In under a minute Longman was back, two burning pints in his hands, obviously having pushed his way to the front of the queue.

"We've got to do something about this, Don," he said, waving his glass around.

"I know, terrible old

"No, no, no, no, no, not that." He took a mouthful. "You're right, we'll do that next! But look at everyone here. All drinking and having a good time. For God's sake, don't they know there's a war on?"

"Maybe that's why they – I mean we, look at us – that's why we are drinking, like this, enjoying ourselves, trying not to think about the war. Drinking like there's no tomorrow... or maybe there isn't none."

"You don't get my point. There's nothing as the programme about the war. Sit fans are like ostriches, putting their heads in the sand, burying themselves in ancient copies of *Suspense* stories, reading greivous wish-fulfilment fantasies – or even worse watching *Star Legion* movies. But you try telling that to a female like *Wilde*. You met him yet?"

"No."

"He's up in his suite, holding court, surrounded by sycophants. He's worse than anything you've heard about in *God, I hate that man*. Say, maybe we should kill him. Try and save science fiction. That would be a great finale to the con-A ritual sacrifice. Better than the usual banquet and fifty doves, all those wankers dressed up as galeiche thugs."

"What about the war?" asked Den as Longman paused for breath. "Has it affected you?"

"This bombs, you mean? No, not too much. It's down here on the south coast that you get most of the echoes, ripples, or whatever. But I gather the war's hit publishing pretty bad."

"You ever met an optimistic publisher? Whoever happens, it's always bad for publishing. Any excuse to go back on promises, cut schedules, reduce advances, postpone royalties."

"There's never been book rationing before."

"True. But if something is cut short, you get people queuing up for them on paperback a month – even those who never bought a book before, never read anything but the *sexcess* results. Fifty million people over five, in it? Twelve books a year. Each. That's bad for publishing!" Den finished his drink. "Another?"

"And the breweries aren't doing too badly."

"The government needs the revenue to pay the unemployed so the unemployed can buy beer so that the government can get the tax. Elementary economics."

"You realise, Dan, the world could end tomorrow."

"That long? Plenty more drinking time."

"You don't care, do you?" said Longman. "No one cares. This is reality, science fiction came to life, and no one takes any notice. Okay, I'll have another pint."

Longman was wrong, thought Den. You couldn't write science fiction about the war, because it wasn't a science fiction subject, not any more. It was here and now, today, mainstream, a topic for television reports and newspapers. Sit that dealt with specific contemporary issues usually became outdated before publication. What good was that? No reprints, no foreign rights.

The news had taken long enough to break. In the British media. The rest of the world knew what was happening before the free press of London said a word. There was no way that people could suddenly find themselves in the middle of events which had occurred a few centuries previously and not think that something funny was going on.

Den had been involved in at least half a dozen time bomb attacks, although today's had subjectively been

the longest. His conscience the first had been a bomb from the last war – he'd seen a doodlebug whizzing high above town, on its way to crash into the capital during 1944. Since then he'd boarded a bus which had turned into a train, woken up one day and found that his flat had become a *Thirties* hotel bedroom, seen a house-drawn fire tender race out from the local fire station, watched a farmer ploughing a field which had become a council estate thirty years previously, gone to the cinema and ended up watching a music hall programme.

All his experiences had spawned relatively few years, considering the age of the universe, and they had become more vivid and prolonged over the past few weeks. Nothing he had seen appeared to have come from the future, but that was because there was no future, the way he worked it out. This really was the war to end all wars.

News of the secret weapon (Dan had no idea who it was meant to be secret from – maybe the general public – as both acts of antagonists were allegedly armed with such devices) finally leaked out at about the same time as it was realised that there was actually a war going on. But time bombs could only be explained away by the war, so it was almost a relief to know there *was* a war.

Naturally Den didn't believe in time bombs: it was too science fictioned. He still had trouble accepting the idea that whatsumname and his pal had landed on the moon.

The war was being fought in Europe, like the First and Second World Funchups. Geographically in between Russia and the USA, neither of them was too upset about it; they didn't have shells smashing up their towns or flooding tanks causing traffic jams on their roads. A conventional war, like all those who were in favour of nuclear 'defence' had predicted. Conventional in that each side was trying to beat the shit out of the other, the old-fashioned way. Fighting was confined to the battlefield, very confined – except that mainland Europe was the battlefield, which happened to be full of cities and towns and people.

Both sides used time bombs, which disoriented the opposing troops and temporarily displaced them to try and fight, perhaps, a village of fourteenth century French peasants. Air to surface rockets against medieval knights in armour boxes and arrows against nagars.

And just as the guts of Flanders could be heard in Britain, so fragments of these time bombs would be buried across the Channel and catch some hapless citizens and zap them a few decades into the past.

The Russians were the enemy, of course. Say something long enough and loud enough, finally it becomes true. Hence the war. Soviet spies, or maybe communist infiltrators in Parliament – before the Government had locked up all opposition MPs for treason – had stolen the secret of time bombs, otherwise the war would have been won by now. They said that naturally the allies were winning, and victory was assured. Any Day Now. Doubtless the Commie Soviet Russian Reds said the same.

Later Den was pleased to see that George Wright had arrived. Although he was a generation older than Den, Den felt he had more in common with Wright than Rush or Longman. Wright had passed

age or two things his way, and he was also the only one of his associates who knew the sort of writing by which Dan made his living — science fiction only paid for his beer and bags, his dope and women like a essential luxuries.

Soon after Dan had sold his first book, Wright had said "Now that you're a professional, you'll find you only ever have three problems in your writing career." Then he had ticked them off, on index, middle and third fingers of his left hand: "Agents, Editors, Publishers."

Wright was at the bar with Terry Bland, talking about the latter's trouble with his new novel, as Dan joined them. Two years on the first chapter, and it still wasn't right. The older man was nodding sympathetically, but he rolled his eyes at Dan. Wright could hash a chapter over a single cup of coffee.

Bland had made his reputation from a handful of books, each of which had been hailed as a work of genius... by Bland. Unfortunately, they sold and sold and sold, and he could make a good living by averaging a book every two years. One had even been made into a television serial. Bland had the Midas touch. There was no doubt that he worked hard, and he probably had struggled for two years over the first chapter of his new opus. Hard work more than made up for his lack of talent.

Wright was good, very good, but he'd written far too much for anyone to take serious notice of his work. He had been told he was a hack writer, and so he hacked. A book a month to pay for his wife, his children, his so far minimalist house, his swimming pool, his accountant.

"Written any good books lately?" asked Wright, as he led Dan away from the bar, leaving Bland to continue thinking over his first chapter.

Dan shrugged as they sat down. "You know how it is."

Wright nodded. "Yeah. Christ, I wish I was your age again. I'd never write much either, there's too many other better things to do. Look at that!" He nodded towards the woman who had just come into the lounge. His cigar stood up vertically, and he sucked on it hungrily. "All fit and long black hair. Give me half an hour with her."

"Half an hour?"

"It takes us old blokes that long."

"You don't know her?"

"No. Should I? Who is she?"

"Jean Welch, managing director Wolf Books. I'll introduce you. Hey, Jean!"

The woman looked around, then smiled as she saw who had called her. Dan watched her walk across the room. It was easy to tell what a good author Wright was by the consciousness and accuracy of his description. All fit and long black hair. She came and sat down, crossing her legs, all tigh and yellow velvet boots.

"George, this is Jean Welch, my favourite publisher here, meet George Wright. With a guy like him, you wouldn't need any other authors... except me of course."

They talked, and the drink flowed like alcohol.

"No," said Wright. "I haven't written any of for eight or nine years. I leave it to those with more talent like Dan here. He's the best, you know, he really is. If only he'd take it seriously, he could leave the others standing."

"I know," said Welch.

They both looked at him, and Dan looked at his gun, knowing that such was lying. George had never read anything he'd written, and Jean had never published one of his books.

"And how about you, Dan?" asked the woman. "What are your current prospects?"

"An unwritten book was a project, a manuscript was a property, a published book was a product."

"I'm writing a novel," said Dan. "A straight science fiction novel."

Welch shook her head slowly in despair, Wright nodded his head slowly in resignation.

"Very hard," said Welch. "To sell a new sort of book these days. A single novel, that is. Why not a trilogy, or better still a series?"

"What about Robert Old?" asked Dan. "You bring out all his latest junk. Boring, dull, tedious, unimaginative rehashes of stuff he did three or four decades ago."

"He's an established big name author, he's written several classics — that's what the readers want."

A classic was any book which had been reprinted

Dan packed his words carefully, he didn't want to sound either angry or rude. The Wolf science fiction list consisted almost entirely of American authors, with three exceptions — and one of these had been dead twenty years. Jean Welch controlled about a quarter of the combined output of British publishers... and what she knew about science fiction could be written on the back of a matchbox.

"The readers don't get much choice," said Dan. "do they? They can only buy what you publish."

"The market for it is dead," insisted Welch. "Unless you want to do a Space Patrol book. We've just bought the British rights for that — to be in with the twelfth television repeat."

"I know what you mean," said Wright, and raised a corner. Take a look at any bookshop, under the science fiction section — if there still is one — and you'll find that half the books are bland and gutsy so-called horror novels which couldn't frighten a five year old. Half the rest are some sort of fantasy: Swordsman and shoguns, swerves of some little-known foreign mythology, magic and mysticism, talking tortoises that have anthropomorphic adventures. You know the kind of crap I mean."

"But you must be doing some science fiction," said Dan to the woman.

"Of course. Thomas Wolfe for a start. He's writing a trilogy for Spout, and we've got an option on the British rights."

"How about it, Laurel?" He's very good, but nothing of his has appeared over here."

"My schedule's full for the next two years. But we have picked up the rights to a ten volume epic by another young American, maybe you've heard of him. Bruce Newcome."

"Newcome? Yeah. I've met him. Met him, but never heard of him. A ten volume epic?" "What's he written?" Dan kept up with most of, bought all the magazines, but he didn't recognise Newcome's name or else he'd have said something when he saw him.

"Don't know if he's written anything yet. A proposal, that's all anyone has to write. Once a project is accepted, then you have to start."

Right then Dan decided that he'd had enough. Enough of Jean Welch, enough of the convention, enough of everything.

He stood up, nodded to Wright. "Excuse me," he said to the woman, "but I've got to leave before I throw up."

He paused at the top of the steps outside the hotel. The guard with the sub-machine gun glared balefully at him, then Dan continued half-out through the narrow gap in the barbed wire barnacle. It was beginning to grow dark. He hadn't realised it was so late. At a convention he lost all sense of time.

He hardly noticed the lanes of diesel-fuel cars on either side of the street, their carcases resting, tyres flat, windows broken. He walked along the centre of the road for a couple of minutes, that was the safest place, away from the dark pavements where infant urban guerrillas lurked in wait for their unwary prey. Then he crossed to the sidewalk and went down to the beach.

Crunching his way across the pebbles and shingle, he finally reached the sand. He sat with his back against the damp rotting piers, drawing endless patterns in the sand for a few minutes, before picking up a variety of sun-bleached stones and hurling them into the lifeless water thirty yards away. It was cold and grey in the twilight, there wasn't anyone else in view. There were miles of empty sand, but a dark figure came towards him from the high-water mark and sat down by his side.

The stranger pulled out a bottle from his pocket and offered it to Dan, saying, "Hi, I'm Alvin Laurel. How's rum?"

Dan looked at him in surprise. "Oh... I'm... I know who you are. Always wanted to meet you. Read all your books, think they're great. It was your first novel that turned me onto it, made me want to be an author."

"Jesus, you make me feel like a geriatric. I know I feel like one sometimes." Dan took the proffered bottle, looking at Laurel through the glass from the corner of his eye. Was he taking the piss? "Thanks." He drank a mouthful, then handed it back. "You don't mean what you just said, do you?"

"No. But I've always wanted someone to say that to me – and I thought you might, too. I saw you leave the hotel, and I really did want to meet you. Keep tabs on the foreign competition, you know. I've already talked to..." His voice faded, his eyes widening as he stared beyond Dan, out to sea.

Dan looked around in time to see the high-curved prow of the Viking longship slide out of the phosphorescent sea and come to a halt on the sand. It was old and weather-beaten, its planks decayed and patched. The huge red and white sail was swiftly furled, and in under a minute a score of her sailors had leapt ashore and were running up towards the promenade. Dan wasn't very impressed, he'd seen it all before at the cinema. But the warriors did their best, whooping and screaming blood-curdling cries as they swung their mighty battleaxes and swarmed up the steps to begin the raping and pillaging which was expected of them.

"Straight out of a sword and sorcery book," said Laurel. "I bet they're made for the convention hotel, they'll probably even be fancy dress."

"More likely gone to try and sell the rights to their autobiographies."

"Translations are always difficult. Anglo-Saxon audiences prefer stuff originally written in their native tongue."

"You sound like one of the enemy."

"A Russian?"

"A publisher." Dan considered explaining to the American something about the Vikings and their significance in English history, in relation to the Angles and Saxons, but he was too drunk. This was the first time he'd been late bombed with someone else, and he noticed that Laurel's reaction was similar to his own. After the initial surprise, he'd accepted it without alarm or fright or amazement or any other discernible emotion.

"Do you believe that story about time bombs?"

"It does," said Laurel, taking a swig from his bottle, "why not?"

"How came it suddenly appeared in all the papers, on the news, at the same time? It sounds like something made up to fit the facts. It's too simple, it explains everything, it's phoney. We didn't even know there was a war on till a month ago – and I'm not sure that there is, it's just another lie. The big lie that people will believe easier than a lot of little ones. If the government tells you one thing, you can be sure that it's another."

"Everyone knows that."

Dan had opened his mouth to continue, now he closed it. Everyone knows that? Did they?

"So what do you think?" prompted Laurel, when Dan continued to sit in silence.

"Apocalypse. Plague. Pestilence. Starvation. Death."

"Sounds like a good plot. What about characterisation?"

"It's the war." Dan continued ignoring him. "It's bound to become nuclear. No one has weapons with out using them, particularly if they're losing. And someone's bound to be losing. I reckon the button has already been pushed. Or will be – in the near future – and the whole space-time continuum has been ripped asunder."

"Very good."

"And it's getting closer, we're getting closer. That's why these so-called time bombs are becoming more frequent, it's because we're approaching the temporal epicentre. Not long now and... the end. There's like no sequel to that, it's the final volume in the series. It might be only here, Europe, but that's enough for those of us who are unfortunate enough to live here."

"Clean up, have another drink."

Dan had another drink. As he passed the bottle back, he noticed the smoke and flames as they began to rise from the convention hotel. Laurel had been right about the Vikings' destruction and now they were sacking the building. Any minute they'd be back with their loot, jeep. Welch along across the browny shorelines of their chief.

"Look at that," he said.

"And look at that," said Laurel.

Dan turned. To the south, above and beyond the longship, the evening sky had suddenly flared into a halo of golden yellow, as bright as any summer sunrise. They watched in silence for the light to die, but it didn't.

Next came the vibration, very little at such a distance but enough to cause a few ripples in the lifeless tide and even shift the loose sand beneath them. Finally

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